

WPC  
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January 8, 2012

What's In A Name?  
Luke 13:10-17

I'm the only person I know who got to choose my own name.

I came to the United States from Korea when I was 4 years old and grew up in California. My Korean name is Kyung, a name my classmates and teachers at school struggled mightily trying to pronounce correctly. In fact, they massacred the pronunciation. I became known as "Key-Yong" at school (sounded to me like "Donkey Kong"). I hated that, since that was definitely NOT my name.

The summer before I entered 6th grade, a golden opportunity presented itself to me. My family moved from Daly City to Oakland, and I would be starting at a new school. My parents asked me if I wanted to choose an English name for myself. Definitely!

So I played around with possible names. Steve...Jim...Joe...no, that didn't quite fit me. After playing around with other possibilities, I finally decided to choose "Ken." And that is now my legal name: Ken Kyung Sunoo.

But it's rare that we pick names for ourselves. Our parents give us our names. Or we're nicknamed by other people. And sometimes these names, these nicknames, are not at all the names we would have chosen for ourselves.

We all know of nicknames given in loving jest, designating what we love in a person – “The Kid,” “Speedy,” “The Funny Guy.”

Yet there are other not so generous names — “Peewee,” “Fatso,” “Dummy.” These names represent our cruelty toward others, rather than our love.

Think about the pain of a name that traps and cuts you to the heart. People carry that pain with them their whole lives. The person who won't eat any ice cream because he was called “Chubby” as a kid, or who avoids social situations because she had such bad acne as a teenager her classmates called her “Pizzaface.” I know firsthand about that kind of pain. I grew up in California at a time when having an Asian face meant being regularly teased and insulted with racial epithets. It took me a long time before I embraced my Korean heritage and became proud of my culture and history.

It makes a great difference what names we are called.

William Shakespeare wrote – “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”<sup>1</sup> And we know what he means. Words are just words on one level.

But on another level, words are not just words. We know the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And we know that often, that’s not true. If you, like me, have ever been on the receiving end of a racial slur, you know words can hurt. If you have ever been the recipient of a sexist comment, or been put down for not being smart enough, pretty enough, athletic enough, you know words can carry a ton of weight. If you’ve ever read John Steinbeck’s book *The Grapes of Wrath* then you know that to be called an Okie was to be viewed as less than fully human.

Today’s gospel is a story about a woman. In our Bibles she is identified as the “crippled” or “bent” woman. We’re never told her name. She’s been crippled with a spirit for 18 years. When people saw her, they probably didn’t say, “Here comes Mary.” Instead, they probably said, “Here comes the crippled woman.”

That was the nickname given to her; she didn’t choose it. We don’t know this woman’s family name. We only know the one given to her by the

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1-2)

town, a name based upon her disability. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman.

And suddenly she is encountered by Jesus, who sees her and decides to heal her. Notice, this miracle is sheer grace on the part of Jesus. The woman doesn't approach Jesus, she makes no request of him, and nothing is said of her faith. Jesus simply takes the initiative to heal her. Once healed, she praises God. But the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant at Jesus because he had healed the woman on the Sabbath.

Henri Nouwen tells the story of an old holy man who saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water of the River Ganges. The old man leaned out over the water, hanging to some roots, and tried to rescue the scorpion. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively he withdrew his hand. A few seconds later, having regained his balance, he stretched himself out again. This time the scorpion stung him so badly that his hand became swollen and bloody. The old man's face contorted with pain.

Just then a passerby saw the old man stretched out over the roots struggling with the scorpion. He yelled, "Hey, stupid, old man! What's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature! Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?" The old man turned to the stranger and said calmly,

“My friend, just because it is the scorpion’s nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save.”<sup>2</sup>

In reaching out to redeem us, God often gets stung. Jesus performs a wonderful act of compassion by healing a woman who was crippled and bent over for 18 years, and in return he gets stung with criticism from the leader of the synagogue.

I’m moved by the plight of this woman who’s been bound and bent by an invisible spirit for such a long time. In Luke 13, this story appears between a passage about a barren fig tree, fruitless for three years, yet graciously given one more year to mature and bear fruit, and a passage about the kingdom of God that compares it to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree large enough for the birds of the air to build nests in its branches. The bent woman is between a tree that produces nothing and a tree that provides sanctuary, foreshadowing the coming of the kingdom of God. But that kingdom will not come without plenty of stings.

Notice that this woman comes to the synagogue to worship, not to be healed. She’s not looking to be cured, but we get a strong sense of her faithfulness, as she immediately praises God when healed.

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, Quoted in Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, Multnomah, 2004, 126-27.

If any of you are brave and willing to try a little physical experiment, please try standing up. I invite you now to join me in an exercise. Now, lean over 45 degrees to have a sense of the woman's predicament. Feel the strain on the lower back, the burden on the neck and shoulders as you try to look around. Notice how bending this way limits your vision of what lies around you. Your perspective is effected. Stooping, it's difficult to look into the faces of those around you, because you're not on the same level with everyone else. You're stuck in a humbling position. It's easy to see how you could become the butt of derision and cruel jokes. (OK, you may now straighten up and be seated).

The controversy in the story is over timing, not on the fact that the woman got healed or that Jesus, in healing her, touched her. The leader of the synagogue is indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath – notice that he doesn't address Jesus directly. Instead, he talks to the crowd, saying, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Before we assail this leader for his lack of compassion and concern, let's consider what he says. Keeping the Sabbath day holy is a big commandment, so big that it's included in the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. Why didn't Jesus just wait a day to

heal, instead of stirring up so much controversy by healing on the sabbath? In this story, the woman's back had been bent for eighteen years. Couldn't she wait just one more day? What difference would it make?

Maybe not much difference to us, but to that woman, it made all the difference in the world. If our brief exercise of stooping over had been prolonged, we would have come to know that even one more minute in that position could have seemed intolerable. That's reason enough to not wait to heal this woman. But for Jesus, I believe it went beyond helping to relieve physical discomfort.

This woman is described as being crippled with a spirit. She is bound by her infirmity. Notice how Luke plays with the words "bound" and "loose." Jesus loosed the woman from the infirmity in which she had been bound. If the Jewish law permitted the loosing of a bound (tethered) animal for watering on the Sabbath, should it not be permitted that this woman, a daughter of Abraham bound for 18 long years, be loosed from her bond on the Sabbath?

If anyone is bound by any kind of infirmity or injustice, if we're to follow the example of Jesus, we're called to action right away. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that justice delayed is justice denied. It's always the right time to do the right thing.

And the really beautiful thing about this story is that it's not only about justice, but about love.

After the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant at Jesus because he healed the woman on the Sabbath, notice what Jesus does. He renames her.

Jesus calls her "a daughter of Abraham." That's significant. This one was known as the crippled, crooked, bent woman, is called by Jesus a daughter of Abraham. What does that mean? Who was Abraham?

Abraham was the great ancestor of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, God promised to make a great nation, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. She is a daughter of Abraham. This means she is an heir to the blessings of God.

She stands up straight. Her life has been renamed. And things will never be the same for her again.

Jesus means to name us as well. The world may burden us with nicknames we don't want, but Jesus reminds us that we are daughters, we are sons of Abraham. Our own lives count, because we are invited to participate in God's great drama of redemption.

Therefore, in our church, when we baptize a baby, we ask what name has been given to the child – "David George" or "Deborah Lynn." And

then, instead of using the family's last name, we say, "Child of the covenant." In other words, we give the child a new name - "Christian." And our prayer is that the child will grow into that name.

You also are a daughter or son of Abraham, a child of the Kingdom. Your name, whatever else we may call you, is "Christian." You've been bought with a price, you are a child of the King. Stand up straight, act like it, and never forget your name. Amen.