

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, January 16, 2011.

(Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42)

What's your name again? What do you like to be called? These are simple enough questions and ones we answer on a regular basis without even thinking. I've only been gone six weeks on sabbatical so hopefully I'll remember everybody's name. But I confess I ask these questions a lot, for my memory for names is not as good as it could be. "Remind me what you like to be called again." When someone calls us by our name, we often feel a connection. And likewise, when someone calls us by the wrong name, it's jarring. What we are called is so much a part of who we are.

Two of the scriptures we heard this morning mention calling and naming. The prophet Isaiah says, "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me." Before even our parents can give us a name, God, our Father and Mother in Heaven, already knows who we are, already understands our true identity. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus bestows a new calling, a new name upon Simon, the brother of Andrew. The scripture describes how Andrew is a disciple of John the Baptist at first. And upon hearing John declare Jesus to be the Lamb of God, Andrew follows Jesus to come and see about this Rabbi Messiah. On the way, he goes to fetch his brother, Simon. And upon their first meeting, the scripture says Jesus just looks at Simon and knows his name, "You are Simon, son of John." You're John's boy. "You are to be called Cephas." We often call him Peter. Jesus, the Son of God, can, with a look into our souls, know us by names we cannot even imagine.

The trouble, of course, is that once we are born we get confused because the world is ready to give us multiple names and identities that aren't true. Our parents do their best to give us a good start. We named our girls Lucy and Stella, good Epiphany names, since Lucy means Light and Stella means Star, but even though we tried to start them out with good names, good callings, I must admit I will never know my children as well as God does. And because we are human, we have a tendency to assign names a lot of times that we don't necessarily intend, names and callings that are more about us than about the person we named. We've often heard parents so proud of their child's accomplishments say, "You're so bright. This is my bright child." What the parent often means is, "You have the potential to accomplish things I couldn't." The child lives with its parents' names. Jesus so wisely kind of points this out. "You are Simon, son of John. You carry the name of your father, you carry the expectations of such a name. I have a new name for you. The name is Cephas. You have a name that only God knows."

A child may grow up to be a great success. A child who's told they're bright and wonderful may be bolstered by the praise they receive early on and that success may become a key part of their identity. "I'm successful, I'm bright, I'm smart." These are all names by which some people are called, but they're not true identities. They may help us some, but they carry weight, they carry anxiety, fear that we won't measure up to the name. "If I don't work hard in school, I won't be as smart as my parents expect me to be. If I don't get that good job, if I don't have a successful career, someone might question my name, might question my family's name, might question my

very identity." More tragically, some children are given more anxious names from the beginning. "He's a little dim. Yeah, he hasn't really amounted to much, he's sort of a failure." And these folks spend their lives either living down to the low expectations or trying desperately to overcome them.

But whether the names are negative or positive, the names we give ourselves, the names we give each other, they're not our true names. Unlike God, unlike Jesus, who with a look at Simon, that rough-hewn fisherman, can see Peter, the future rock of the church, unlike God, we don't have that kind of vision. We keep giving ourselves new names or trying to name other people precisely because we want to know our own names. We hunger to hear God's voice telling us who we really are, but instead of listening it's easier to just spread the confusion by continuing to name other people, by continuing to live under the weight of the names that are not our true names. And this causes pain in the world, such pain we might call sin. And it will continue because so far we haven't figured out a way to operate in this world without naming things and naming each other. But instead of blindly continuing, instead of unconsciously continuing this process of naming, we can at least remember that God has a name for each of us that is true, that God knows us, that God called us, named us even before we were born. And unlike those false names that bring about pain and worry, the name God has for us is a name of freedom because once we know it, there's no worry about whether we can live up to it because it is exactly who we are, perfectly and completely because only God knows us perfectly and completely. When we hear and know our God-given name, we flourish. We flourish.

On my sabbatical, I went on some retreats and tried to spend some time listening to God. I'll confess to you now, I didn't hear my name. I was really hoping. But what I gleaned from the experience of quiet was that it is so important to listen, even if we don't hear anything. Even if we're frustrated because all the false identities within us are competing for our attention, the listening is so important. If we don't listen we're even more likely to continue naming others in ways that perpetuate suffering. So much suffering in our world is a result of this false naming.

This weekend our country remembers the modern day prophet Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and much of his work to champion the dignity of every human being was about challenging the false, dehumanizing names we give each other. It would be insensitive of me to repeat here many of the names Dr. King confronted, names that are meant to make people easier to dismiss. But as we remember Dr. King we must remember that such naming continues, the name-calling goes on today. We have the arrogance, for example, to name human brothers and sisters illegal, to name them illegal and the bearing of that name only invites hatred, inspires retribution and as far as I can see has no holy or Godly purpose.

But perhaps more sinful is that we often stand by silent while others use worse names to dismiss and dehumanize people who do not fit into a certain mold of race or class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality and so on. We stand by while the name-calling goes on. As a man of deep faith, Dr. King knew that God has a name for each of us, and thus he rebelled so strongly against the names we give each other to make ourselves feel less confused about who we are. Because that's what name calling is all about, right? We feel confused about who we are so we try and make other people confused by calling them a name, too? That's what we teach the children

anyway. Well, they're just calling you a name because they don't feel good about themselves. Yet we continue to do it.

Unlike the oppressive names of this world that divide us, God's name for us will make us more capable of loving our fellow humans. We will be called bright not because of our brilliant careers or our straight A's. We'll be bright because we will be a light to the nations, as Isaiah says. We'll be called servant not because we work under someone else, but because we serve all people in the name of Christ. God is uttering a name to our souls, a name of freedom, a name of love, but we are distracted by the names and callings that misidentify us. We've been called by the wrong names for so long it's hard to even conceive of another identity. God help us.

So often Dr. King's work against oppression has not resulted in less name-calling, we just try and replace the more ugly sounding names with less ugly sounding ones. We seem to need something to call people. But instead of really listening to what we should be called, what God is calling us, we get impatient and the name-calling begins again. Only God -- I'll say it again -- only God can tell us who we really are. So we can take it off our to-do list to name everybody and everything. Our job is to challenge the name-calling that makes us less than the people God created us to be.

And so how do we do that? Well, one way is we remember what Andrew did in the Gospel this morning. He went to get his brother, Simon. When we go to get our brothers and our sisters, we go to get them calling them by the best name we know and we tell them that they don't have to be identified by the names the world gives them. You don't have to be called that anymore. We find ways to share that we have found in the name of Jesus Christ the hope for a new calling. We also commit ourselves to listen.

This Martin Luther King weekend, we'll hear lots of King's wonderful and amazing and inspiring words. It's less well known that during a period of his life -- Dr. King, as you may know, was highly inspired by Mohandas Mahatma Gandhi -- King kept a regular day of silence. For one day during the week he wouldn't speak. Apparently this drove his family and his co-workers crazy. But King, Gandhi, understood the importance of listening if we are to have anything of substance to say. If we are to know the name God has for us, we have to listen. And we can certainly listen alone and we should spend time in solitude alone listening for the still small voice of God. But we also listen here in community this morning. In the name of Jesus we listen for Christ calling us. What name does God have for us that we might worry no longer, that we might flourish in the delight of God's love? By what name is God calling you? In scripture, sacraments, this gathered body, this body of Christ, God is speaking. We gather to listen so we might be set free. We gather to hear our true names so that we might be called bright, a light to the nations, so that all the people of the earth, all whom we call brothers and sisters might come and see and hear the calling of God.