

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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I Will Call You By a New Name

No more will anyone call you Rejected, and your country will no more be called Ruined. You'll be called Hephzibah (My Delight), and your land Beulah (Married), Because God delights in you and your land will be like a wedding celebration. – Isaiah 62:1-5

I am blessed to have a truly wonderful last name. Smillie. Can you imagine a better last name than that? Aside from your own of course, which I am sure you are very attached to. But if you were able to be really objective, wouldn't you agree that Smillie ranks way at the top of great names? It is truly a name that is good for me, because it is a name to live up to. And it is a name that is good for everyone else as well, because it makes people smile just to hear it. Over the course of my life I have come to realize that I have one of the great last names, perhaps the greatest of all great names.

I didn't always feel that way, you know. Because when I was growing up, I was more aware that Smillie is an easy name to make fun of. Some of my crueler friends – and it is always your friends who are able to find the ways to be cruel to you – especially those of my friends who had ordinary, forgettable names, took out their jealousy by making fun of my name. First of all they just called me by my last name, saying it with a sneering or dismissive tone. But they quickly realized that simply calling me Smillie sounded an awful lot like an affectionate nickname, and that was not the effect they were looking for.

So they started to call me by another nickname, closely related to my actual last name, a name that you get by replacing the first I in my real last name with an E, a name that conjures body odour and offensive olfactory sensations, and the like. I found that word quite hurtful, which is why they kept calling me that. To this day, I hesitate to tell people about that, lest it catch on, again. So I'm trusting that you are all more mature than those I grew up with!

It isn't true, you know, what our parents taught us, that “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Sticks and stones can cause bruises, lacerations, concussions, and yes broken bones, but that will all heal. Being called a name is like being given poison or a virus; it can get inside of you and rot your insides. It can stick in your soul like a parasite.

There is a young lady I know who used to be very talkative, until she was about the age of five, and an adult asked, in a careless moment, “Don’t you ever stop talking?” Well, that shut her up. She took that label, of “chatterbox,” into her soul and it festered there, poisoning her sense of herself. And for years this young lady bit her tongue.

And on the scale of damaging names, chatterbox isn’t even in the top ten. Without even naming the ones considered profanity, we can think of some pretty damaging ones: loser, scum, stupid, ugly, fat, clumsy, old, useless, unlovable, unworthy, faggot, wimp, dyke, bossy.

It isn’t true, that names can never hurt you. Their work is insidious, because long after the people who called you that name are dead and gone, you might continue to repeat it to yourself, thinking it is true, thinking it defines you, thinking that is who you are, thinking that is more real than your actual name.

Jesus took the names we call each other very seriously, comparing them to murder: “if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” [Matthew 5:22]

There was a time when the people of Israel were repeating such names to themselves. It came after the exile, when after their long Babylonian captivity, they were permitted to return to their ancestral land. They had been in Babylon for at least two, maybe three generations. Many of them had prospered there. They had homes and businesses, so many stayed. But some of them went back, with great hopes and expectations for a paradise on earth. It didn’t turn out that way. They made the long pilgrimage back, many weeks of travel across forbidding terrain, exhausting whatever savings they had to make the trip. And when they reached their destination, instead of a paradise, they discovered a ruined city, a devastated environment and an depressed economy.

And it didn’t get much better for another three or four generations, eighty years, more or less. The Great Depression lasted about ten years. This was about eighty years. It was the mother of all Depressions. The people of Israel limped along, struggling to survive. The promised land was not as they had been promised. The paradise they had expected was anything but. Foreigners were inclined to make fun, or even worse, to offer pity, and you all know that sometimes pity can be harder to take than outright hostility. Israel was then as Haiti or Somalia are today.

The passage we read from the book of Isaiah comes from this period in the fifth century before the Common Era. It speaks about the names the people of God were called in this period: “rejected” sounds an awful lot like “loser.” It speaks of the names that the land was called: “ruined” sounds an awful lot like “the wrong side of the tracks.”

But the prophet does not see as others see. He sees as God sees. That’s really what prophecy is, you know. It isn’t about predicting the future. Prophecy helps us to see as God sees. And what God sees is not what others see. Where others see a depressed and blighted country, God sees something delightful, something attractive, something like a golden crown, like a chalice of gold and jewels, something desirable, as desirable as the most beautiful woman or the most gorgeous guy you can imagine. And just as an ardent man offers his potential bride a new name, so God offers his people a new name, a name even better than Smillie! No longer the pitying, callous names: rejected or ruined, no longer ugly, fat, stupid, but the terms of endearment those who love us most whisper in our ears: “Honey, Sweetheart, Dear One, My Love.”

No longer will the people of God be defined by the cruel or pitying names others put on us. Now we will be defined by the love of one who sees into our soul and sees what we were made to be, what we are capable of being.

Perhaps in your past you’ve done something truly terrible, that you have had difficulty living down. Perhaps there is someone who keeps reminding you of how terrible it was, that thing you did. Perhaps that someone is you. For the rest of your life, you might have to live with some pretty difficult labels: *liar, thief, adulterer, slut, baby killer, wife beater*. You can let those labels into your soul and let them define you, in which case you will become a person you really don’t want to be. But you have another option: you can take responsibility for what you did, but refuse to let yourself be defined by that. The fact that you aren’t proud of that act, the fact that you are ashamed of it, is a sign that you are better than your worst moments. You can claim that goodness in yourself as who you truly are. You will have to live with the shame of an act you can never take back, but which you can yet live down. You can find a new name, a name that goes to the root of who you truly are, a name like “sorry,” like “forgiven,” like “loved.”

Perhaps you know the name John Newton. Today, we remember John Newton as the author of the great hymn “Amazing Grace.” What you may not know is that John Newton was once the captain of a ship that carried slaves from Africa to the

new world. Slave ships were brutal places, where a good passage meant half your cargo survived the voyage. (that's what they called the human beings in the hold, "cargo!") John Newton could have defined himself as a slaver, and only a slaver, but he didn't. Something about it repulsed him, and eventually he left the trade and became a pastor. He experienced a grace that made him realize that although he was a wretch in a wretched business, he was yet loved, and that the loving grace of God could save even him.

I believe we are not defined by our past, or by the labels others put on us. I believe that we are defined instead by God's grace, the totally unmerited generosity of a God who knows us at our worst but loves us anyway, and who never, ever give up on us, never abandons us, never disowns us.

I want to close this sermon by inviting you to think of two names, or two labels. I want you to write those names on two small pieces of paper. The first name is a name which you may have called yourself or others may have called you, which limits you and keeps you from becoming the person calls you to be. In a minute, I'm going to invite you to bring those names forward and we'll burn them, as a sign of releasing them and letting them go.

The second name is a name that you aspire to. It may be a virtue, like Joy, Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence, Justice or Compassion. It may be an adjective, like Honest, Faithful, Courageous, or Prophetic. Or it might be a name that describes a personality trait or characteristic about yourself that you admire: like Happy or Doc from the Seven Dwarves. Whatever name you aspire to, I invite you to write that on a second piece of paper and keep in your wallet or your purse, or tack on a mirror or your fridge – someplace where you will be reminded of it, and reminded that God calls you by a name that is better than what you call yourself.