

“Naming Power”
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When I drive around, I often listen to Public Radio. The other day I heard a discussion about what we should call people who live and work in this country, and who came here from another country, while never making the move official. Do you see how carefully I phrased that? These folks are usually referred to in one of two ways. They are called either illegal immigrants or undocumented workers. Sometimes there are slight variations, but it tends to be one of those two labels. While it is usually true that particular political perspectives accompany the labels, the discussion didn't center on politics.

Instead, it centered on what *meanings* the different labels conveyed. Does calling an immigrant illegal make the person themselves *sound* illegal, and therefore somehow less than fully human? Or, does calling someone an undocumented worker ignore the fact that they probably have plenty of documents and they just don't happen to be the *legal* documents? The conversation went around and around without either side reaching common ground with the other, but with both sides continuing to be assured that their name was the correct one.

I imagine everyone here has heard—and probably used—the expression “sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” I am not sure that's true. In fact, I would bet that each one of us can dredge up stories from our past about how names have indeed hurt us. Maybe we remember a cutting nickname from a family member. Or perhaps we remember all too clearly certain schoolyard taunts that were repeated over time and stung and lingered.

As New Englanders, our collective common sense teaches us that it is the sticks and stones that we need to worry about and not a little name calling. But over the years, the negative effects of bullying have been getting increasing attention. Plus in the last week alone I have heard it stated as a fact at least three times that one of the greatest influencers of our behavior is our peer group—sometimes on the news, and again last night in conversation. And doesn't that make sense? It makes a big difference if you stand among peers as a target of ridicule or abuse, or as a hero.

So, despite being raised as a Yankee, and despite doing my share of kidding around and name calling, I do believe that names hold some power. And I am not the only one. The name of God is rendered in the Old Testament as the four Hebrew letters Yod He Vav He. It is understood to hold such power that no attempts were made to pronounce it out loud, with one exception. On *one day* a year, the Temple Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, and would speak the Holy name aloud. Outside of this single annual utterance,

extreme measures were taken to avoid saying the name at all. Alternate titles were used, such as Adonai, which means “The Lord,” or Ha Shem, which means “The Name,” or simply God, which is really just a label of God’s status—like calling ourselves humans.

The Bible demonstrates the power of naming, too. Many Biblical characters receive new names at critical junctures in their lives. Abram¹ became Abraham² as he lived into a deeper covenant with God and became the father of nations. Jacob became Israel—which means “he who wrestles with God”—after going toe to toe with the Almighty, or at least an angel, in an all night wrestling match.³ Even Saul, onetime persecutor of the radical Jewish group known as the Way, received a new name after a vital and mystical encounter with Jesus Christ on the way to Damascus.⁴ Names have power. They can hurt us, or they can bless us.

Christian traditions include bestowing new names at Christening, confirmation and other ritualized times in the lives of believers. Pastors pick up a new name in their ordinations—we are thereafter titled “Reverend,” or “Pastor” Mr.-or-Ms.-Fill-in-the-Blank. Names have power. They can change us. They can make us feel miserable, or they can help us make the move from places of desolation into places of blessing.

This morning’s reading from Isaiah concerns a powerful moment of renaming in the life of the Jewish people. They were on the way back from a long time in exile. They had been bodily removed from their homeland and forced to live far away in Babylon. They felt completely forsaken and desolate.

Generations had passed since they were first exiled, but they kept their traditions alive by meeting next to the rivers that led the way back toward their homeland. Through all their troubles, God kept speaking to the Jewish people and reminding them of the Holy presence among them. Through it all, God spoke to them and kept calling their names and reminding them of their relationship. Through it all, God reminded them that God found delight in them, even when they could not find it among themselves. And that they gave them strength. That gave them the ability to find their way back home when their captivity ended. Names have power. They can bless us or they can hurt us.

Now, did you hear what Pat Robertson said about the earthquake in Haiti? At least fifty thousand people died. Tens of thousands are still unaccounted for. There is untold suffering and desolation. Thousands of people are wandering the streets—homeless, and feeling forsaken. So, Pat Robertson declared that the woes of the people of Haiti come from having made a pact with Satan two centuries ago. In other words: the Haitian’s are damned, and not only that, but they

¹ Meaning *exalted ancestor*. See Genesis 17.

² Meaning *ancestor of a multitude*, see Genesis 17.

³ See Genesis 32:24-28.

⁴ Acts 9:1-22.

brought it on themselves. The sorrow they are so clearly experiencing must have resulted from some way in which they offended God, or courted Satan.

Is that the message we hear from God? If you are suffering, you deserve it? Or does God see us when we feel desolate, broken, or forsaken and tell us a different message? Isaiah says “yes,” and I agree with him. Isaiah says that in our suffering and woe, that God is telling us that we are God’s *delight*! And it doesn’t end there. We not only *delight* God, but God intends to court *us*. God wants to *marry* us—indeed, just “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”⁵

You see, even when we feel surrounded by doom or despair, and all hope is lost—God loves us. Not in some abstract and impersonal way, but in a powerful, intense and wild way: one on one, not just as some faceless group, but every one of us as an individual. God is wildly in love with every one of us. Each of us has our own ways of knowing God, and each of us receives different gifts from God. But God loves us each wildly, whether we are wise, or foolish, whether we are faithful or indifferent, whether we are healers or the healed, God loves us wildly. Whether we are miracle workers or in need of a miracle, whether we are prophets or followers, whether we are discerners of spirits, or imbibers of spirits, God loves us wildly. Whether we are speakers in tongues, or interpreters of tongues, or silencers of tongues, God loves us wildly. God is wildly in love with each and every one of us—even, and this part really blows my mind—God is wildly in love *even* with Pat Robertson!

We must never forget that even the people who most challenge us are beloved children of God’s. Thinking otherwise leads us to name beloved children of God as worthy of damnation, which they are not. Holding onto that humility levels us all before God. It reminds us that we are all creatures before our Creator. As such, we can—and should—leave all judgments up to God. We can let go of that deep, human impulse to judge others as wicked, or immoral, or lesser simply because they are different from us. That allows us to step a little further into God’s view of us.

In many fundamental ways we couldn’t be less like God. Yet we are wildly beloved by God. We are courted. We are sought for a deep and abiding union. Whether we are lifelong Christians or new converts, God wants us. Whether we are of a little faith, or a lot of faith, or no faith, God wants us. Whether we are pale or peach, or tan or brown, God wants us. Whether we are straight or gay, male or female, gender identified or gender ambiguous, bisexual or a-sexual, God wants us. Whether we are republican, democrat, independent or a-political, God wants us. God calls us all by name—we are beloved, delightful, and even *rejoiced* over.

⁵ Isaiah 62:5.

Names have power. They can change us. They can help us make the move from places of desolation into places of blessing. And that is the good news this morning: even when we feel most broken, despairing and desolate, we are indeed a cause of wild love and deep delight. May God grant us the ability to see one another through Holy eyes, so that we are able to delight in one another fully and truly, and to make of this world the realm of peace, justice, and wild love which God intends.

Amen?

Isaiah 62:1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ²The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. ⁵For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.