

Pentecost B5
June 28, 2015
"A New Name"
Central Presbyterian Church
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Mark 5

Mark 5:21-43

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

²⁴So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. ²⁸For she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

A

He was the pastor at a church and various people there didn't like the way he was leading them- they thought he was dumb and foolish. They disliked him so much that they refused to use his name. In fact they made up a name so they wouldn't have to say the real one. Behind his back they called him, "The One Whose Name Shall Not Be Spoken." It was a neat little box in which to put him- if his real name wasn't spoken then he wasn't quite real enough to be a brother in Christ who deserved grace and mercy and forgiveness.

This past week President Obama gave an interview about racial tensions in our country. In order to make his point he used the "N-word." Here's a name that conjures up slavery and oppression, that defines not only a person but whole communities of people. It means to belittle and stigmatize and hurt all at the same time. It's a nickname that divides and disparages, putting up boundaries that cannot be crossed, limits beyond which normal human relationships cannot be shared. It's a name that keeps people in their place against their will.

We can easily slip into using names and nicknames and not realize the power they can have. Sometimes names bind and sometimes they loose. A name can condemn someone or it may create a new future that brings hope and dignity. There's a lot in a name.

B

Today's gospel reading puts us in the midst of a great crowd of people seeking Jesus' attention. He is approached by a religious man whose daughter is dying and Jesus agrees to travel to that man's home

and heal the daughter. But there is someone else in the crowd seeking Jesus' healing. A "woman who has been bleeding for twelve years" follows Jesus through the crowd. She hopes that with all the people pressing around him Jesus won't know that she is there. She believes that if she touches his robe she will be healed. We know the rest of the story. At least we think so.

Many New Testament stories have unofficial names, like "The Prodigal Son." Giving it that name also gives it a certain twist. What if the story was called, "The Loving Father?" That gives us a whole new way to think about the son who runs away from home, squanders his inheritance, and comes crawling back only to see his father with his arms wide open. Well, the woman in the crowd who is looking for Jesus has often been called "the woman who was bleeding for twelve years." There's a lot in that name. In her culture her bleeding would have meant she could not be touched or married. In some ways she was a dead woman walking. Unless she could be healed.

The power of Jesus does heal her and Jesus renames her for all time. He calls her, "Daughter"—one of the family, one who is included not excluded, one who is loved not avoided, one who can be touched not shunned, one who is restored to full relationship with her community.

C

This change of names, this healing and saving of a daughter, occurs in the streets of the community. Jesus engages people where they are, allowing himself to be confronted with the needs and the suffering and the hopes of all kinds of people. He looks into eyes and hearts and lives and finds opportunities to serve and heal and save. On the street and in a crowd a well-known synagogue leader can conveniently run into Jesus and get his attention, and a woman in need of healing can hope to touch him unnoticed.

Touching is a remarkable part of today's reading and of Jesus' ministry in general. His is a close encounter type of ministry. He is close enough to be touched by the woman he calls daughter. He goes to the home where the dead girl lives and touches her as well. Sometimes I think about our sharing the peace of Christ- how we shake hands and hug and kiss. For some that is the only time in the whole week when someone else touches them. It is a powerful thing for them to be that close and to care that much.

We live in a region that is getting more and more crowded but we guard our space, don't get close enough to touch very many people, and know only a few names. Today we're more likely to say, "You know, the couple next door who are getting divorced," or, "That guy who shuffles down the street," or, "The one whose name shall not be mentioned." Those are the names we may know better.

D

The events of the past couple of weeks challenge us to consider the names we use for others, the names we use to label other people, different people, the names that can interfere with us accepting those who are different or forgiving them or touching them. Sometimes it's good to check the boundaries we draw and identify the people we would cross the street to avoid if we saw them coming. How many are there? Have we labeled them or allowed someone else's labels to draw boundaries for us? Have we given them a name that they will never be able to shake off?

Jesus turns that upside down. He wades into the crowds and crosses the boundaries, whatever they may be, that have made someone unacceptable. Suddenly a woman who was avoided at all costs becomes “daughter” and is restored to her place in the community, given her life back, granted a future. And Jesus calls us to do the same, to see people as they are, not as they are labeled. Jesus calls us to name others in ways that heal and save and restore, honoring all people as children of God.

But we know that. We expect that in a sermon or a Sunday School lesson. Discrimination, racism, bad blood—whatever it is that tempts us to name people badly isn’t going to go away miraculously with one more sermon.

E

It might help though, it might be possible for us to set aside our habit of naming if we recognize the names we are called, the ways we may have been reduced to a label or a category or put behind a boundary that cannot be crossed.

When I applied to be a seminary student years ago I got a call from the dean of students who asked who I thought I was. “You’ve been a music teacher, right?” He said. Yes, I replied I taught high school music and worked in a university school of music. “Well, we’ve had musicians here before and they haven’t cut it. Why would we want you?” We’ve all experienced something like that. Someone has made us an outsider because they named us as “too young,” “too old,” a female, having the wrong skin color, or maybe just having a different idea how to do something. Or maybe we’ve suffered an illness or made a mistake that has come to define us and slapped a label on us we can’t shake off.

But Jesus names you differently. He names you “friend”, “brother”, “sister”, “daughter”, “son”, “beloved” and more. In fact, in your baptism you have been named a child of God, and no matter what others may call you or what you may do or have done to you, God sees you as a unique and special person worthy of dignity and honor and love. During the week we may forget that. We may live with other images of ourselves.

But we gather in this place to hear our name once again and reclaim our true identity. Then it’s our turn to go out and name people in new ways. No longer “the couple who got divorced”, or “the child who is autistic”, or “the girl who got pregnant”, or “the man who gets under my skin.” This week we can name people “child of God” or “beloved” or “friend of Christ.” We can free them to live into God’s promise and revel in God’s dream for them.