

Called...
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 21, 2022

Please Read:
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17

I grew up learning to respect peoples' names. If I come across a new name, I'll often ask, "What does your name mean?" If you don't know, look it up. My name, Raymond Scott Herr, was given to me because it had meaning for our family: Raymond was given to the first male son for a few generations (I didn't really like the name so our first son Daniel broke the tradition), but Scott means wanderer or seeker, and as most of you German-speaking people know, *Herr* in the Old German means *Lord* - so my name means "Seeker, or Searcher after the Lord"). I like my name. But I found out early on in life that people find ways to joke about names. None of my friends in school seemed to think Raymond was a good name, so would always make fun of it. "Everybody does NOT love Raymond!" Even in more sober Switzerland, it was difficult having the last name Herr in Zurich while we lived there for six years. Even though it's an old Swiss name, people thought I stuttered! "Hi, I'm Herr Herr." And they thought I was crazy when I'd say, "and this is my wife, Frau Herr!" I had a Nigerian friend whose name was God's Power. That's right, "God's Power" He's an engineer in the French company *TotalEnergies*, and the French must have given him a hard time, because within a year he was insisting people call him only GP...

Anyway, you and I both know that what we are called has meaning. Your name is central to your sense of self and the years of forming your identity. When you were little, the nicknames you received helped or hurt you in the way you thought and felt about yourself. When someone calls you Scaredy-Cat, Liar, Dummy, Fatso, Yellow Belly, Bean-pole, Sissy, Four-eyes, Faggot, Cripple, or a whole list of other ugly names, it feels bad, and it's not always just a matter of "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me..." Childish racist slurs, national or ethnic put-downs can create a sense of very adult anger and can pollute the heart and mind for years. Sometimes, what you're called hurts, and hurts terribly...

Today's Gospel is a story about a woman. In the NRSV she is identified only as "*the bent woman*." How would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? She was bent over, had been bent over, staring at the ground, back contorted, for many, many years. She doesn't appear to have a name to anyone in town. When they saw her, creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, they didn't say, "here comes

Mary,” or “Look, there’s Elizabeth.” They said, “here comes *the bent woman*, the cripple.”

That was her name and in her name was her life, her destiny, her whole sad fate. The woman doesn’t have a name apparently, other than the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability. She doesn’t have an identity other than that of a victim. She doesn’t have a family, it seems, no occupation, nothing other than her deformity. She is the one who is bent, bearing on her shoulders an invisible yet heavy burden, the burden of being different, the burden of not looking like everyone else, the burden of not being able to do what everyone else does. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman, and she’s been that way for 18 years.

But then she is encountered by Jesus. And how differently Jesus refers to her: Woman! Jesus heals her, and that’s wonderful. In the Greek, the word for heal here is *apolelytai*, “released.” Touching a woman who would be considered “unclean,” Jesus embraces her with life. For the first time as an adult, she is able to stand up, to look straight ahead and praise God, to be restored to even more than what we call normalcy, but the person God intended for her to be. Perhaps just as wonderful is the way Jesus speaks to her, what Jesus says about her. He does not call her disabled, or hindered, though from most points of view, she is. Jesus seems to have no need to make her a professional victim, so her disability redefines her whole life.

Jesus calls her “a daughter of Abraham.” I think that’s significant. This one was called the crooked woman, the bent woman, is called by Jesus a *daughter of Abraham*. What does that mean? Abraham was the great, great-grandfather of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, a promise was given. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

She is a daughter of Abraham. She is an heir to the blessings of God. Moreover, as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labeling. She, bent though she is, is part of God’s great salvation of the whole world.

She stands up straight. Even if her back had not been healed by Jesus, I think she would now have stood up straight. Her life had been caught up in God’s promises to the world. Her life was renamed, not as a long story of injustice, victimization, and sadness, but as part of the great story of God’s redemption.

Let us remember her, then, not as just one more victim, not as the bent woman, but as a daughter of Abraham. That's her real name!

The Good News of today's Gospel lesson is this: Jesus means to name you too. He will not let you acquiesce to the names the world wants to lay upon you. In a time when some of you are feeling broken and bent under the weight of cancer, divorce, or worried with the dark news of politics and violence, or pushed out by an employer, or by pressures as a parent or school that seem too much for you to bear; or the way people treat you because of the color of your skin or sexual orientation; remember who you are in Christ.

You are beloved of God. You are part of God's family, beloved children, friends, heirs of God's everlasting Kingdom. Your life is meant to count for something, to take its role in God's great drama of redemption; you are called to remember who you are and live a life of praise.

But this is where the text gets a little tricky...Did you notice what happens when Jesus renames her? The leader of the synagogue is "indignant" because the rules of when you could stand up straight or how you could praise God had apparently been broken. And Jesus was called a heretic.

Unfortunately, there's often misnaming going on in the church. I've heard people use terms like Pentecostal, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Charismatic more as an accusation or judgment. This week is the 450th anniversary of what is known as the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre. Back on a warm summer day in Paris, August 23, 1572, thousands of Protestants were slaughtered by Catholics. Pure religious bigotry. Today, I'm worried we're going to have the Election Day massacre in this country, with Republican fanatics killing all Dems. You know that's what some people are calling for! It's a sad story that repeats itself over and over whenever we too easily call people the Enemy. Hutus. Tutsis. Ukrainians. Russians. Savages. Conservatives. Liberals. Fascists. Commies. Gays. Lesbians. Bisexual. Trans. Traitors, etc. You get the idea. Names can be used to de-humanize those "other" people so they become disposable objects of our wrath.

Is that the way we are to call one another? Not here, not in this church! Unless we too want to be called "hypocrites," merely acting like we know about the gospel of God's grace and love. Even the Lord called his own confused and treacherous disciples "friends." Did you know that the name Christians (which literally means "little Christs) was really a derogatory term that followers of Jesus were called by their enemies? The Christians accepted the term as a way

of trusting God... Kind of like how the LGBTQ community has adopted Queer...

Jeremiah understood that God knows us before we know our own name. God formed us in the womb. Each life is precious. God has great plans for each of our lives. We may feel we are insignificant. Like Jeremiah, we have our excuses, “I am only a boy...” “I am only a girl...” I am only... you fill in the blanks... Remember your baptism! We always ask the name, as baptism is symbolic of the process of spiritual formation that seeks to recover our true identity as God’s children and move toward a life that lives into God’s great plan and purpose for our lives. In baptism, we will give the child or adult baptized a much more revealing name - “member of the family of God.” We claim God’s promise that life will be a story of growing into that name, coming to embody that name in a personal and communal story of repentance and faith, living into God’s gracious dreams for us.

This week one of my favorite authors died. Frederick Buechner said of his own name, “If somebody mispronounces it in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what’s foolish is me. If someone forgets it, I feel that it’s I who am forgotten... When I tell somebody my name, I have given them a hold over me that they didn’t have before. If they call out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not. Just like when God tells Moses God’s name... God hasn’t had a peaceful moment since! Yes, it was Buechner who encourages us to “listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than the excitement and the gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”¹

Today I invite you to consider again the grace of your calling... I pray that you will remember, like the prophet Jeremiah (whose name means, by the way, “God establishes”), that God establishes you with the words: “You are mine.... I knew you before you were in your mother’s womb...” I pray you would hear your name spoken in love by our Savior, and that you would stand up straight as God’s beloved, created in the image of God! Forgiven, loved, called to live into the likeness of the One who out of the depth of God’s love gave his life for you and calls you to give your life for others. That’s, I hope, what it means to be called “Christian” today.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and Sabbath Rest. Amen.

¹ David Brooks, “The Man Who Found His Inner Depths (*New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2022), A23.