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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 8: 26-39

“What’s In a Name?”

Generous God, strengthen our hearts and hands for the ministry of hospitality, that we may welcome, forgive, and heal others in your name, thus extending the gift of your grace. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me.”

I don’t know who came up with that saying, but whoever did must never have been called names as a child or teenager.

Stupid, fat, ugly, skinny, dork, nerd, dumb – these are just a few of the choice names kids call one another, and they hurt. Whether in person or over the internet, name calling hurts and can inflict life-long emotional damage on a child and teenager. As we’ve seen from the news, sometimes name calling has tragic consequences, as was the case of Megan Myer in O’Fallon or the young woman in Massachusetts, both of whom committed suicide after being called names.

Names hurt because, whether they are true or not, they have the power not just to describe us but to define us. There’s a TV commercial for the Salvation Army that runs quite often and catches my attention. It says, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a – and hears where it catches my attention – a crackhead, drug addict, alcoholic, meth freak, a wretch like me. I once was (and again, it grabs the viewer’s attention), homeless, broken, sad, just lost. These are people defined by the names our society puts on them, and it’s clear from their faces that these names hurt.

Today we meet a demon-possessed man whose name hurts. When Jesus asks him his name he says “Mob. My name is Mob.” This is his name because he is afflicted by a mob of demons. I can almost hear the sadness in his voice. He’s only known by his sickness and by the magnitude of his oppression.

Mob is homeless. He lives in the town cemetery. He doesn’t wear any clothes. The townspeople have shackled him with handcuffs and chains, and when he breaks through them, they shackle him again. They guard him constantly.

I’m taken with how Jesus simply asks the man, “What is your name?” Jesus heals many people who have no name, and he doesn’t always stop to ask what a person’s name is. But here he does. He stops to ask the naked, homeless madman who lives in the cemetery, “What is your name?” And the man answers, “Mob. My name is Mob,” because that is how the people have defined him.

Last week, I was listening to the Diane Rehm show. She was interviewing Donald Miller, the author of “Blue Like Jazz” and a new book titled “Father Fiction”. It’s about the struggles he faced as a child and teenager growing up without a Dad. It’s clear that the label “fatherless child” hurt him and for a long time defined who he was and what he thought he could do.

He contrasts his labeling with, of all people, Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose parents taught him that every child should grow up with the understanding that if he didn’t exist his family couldn’t function. “Here’s a guy,” Donald says, “Who grew up to be President and presupposed that the world needed him”. “I grew up”, Donald says, “presupposing that I was a burden on the world”-all because of the label “fatherless child”. He had to learn that he had a positive message for the world, that he had something to contribute to the world because as a kid he was always given the message by outsiders that he wasn’t worth much because he didn’t have a father. I think it goes to show that we are formed, in both positive and negative ways, by what people call us and say about us. The labels and names we use to define people, really do define them.

But then along comes Jesus who asks this man, “What is your name?” Since Jesus has never been one to tolerate oppression, he exorcises the demons from the man. The townspeople, who took drastic measures to contain the man, came to see if it’s true. And when they came, they saw the madman, whom they had taken careful precautions to shackle and guard, sitting at Jesus’ feet. I love what the scripture says next, “It was a holy moment. And for a short time they were more reverent than curious.” But then reality begins to set in for them.

And the townspeople ask Jesus to leave. Once again, I am taken with what the scripture says, “They got together and asked Jesus to leave. Too much change, too fast, and they were scared.”

The people had isolated the madman and had control of the situation. But Jesus entered their community and disturbed it and their way of life. Jesus had the power of God, and that is a power they couldn’t manage, control, or calculate. God’s power, even when used for the good of the community, is frightening. What will God do next in our community, the townspeople wondered. What will God do next? The question, apparently, was too fearful to answer, because they asked Jesus to leave. They made the choice to react to Jesus with fear rather than faith.

The thing is, on the whole, people like things just the way they are-even if they know something better is possible. Sure, the townspeople might not like it that a naked madman lives in their cemetery, but at least it’s familiar. At least they know what to expect of him and the situation. He’d become part of their moral and social order. But when the demons leave and he’s just Bill or Bob or Buddy, they don’t know what to do. In fact, Luke says, they’re downright mad.

The thing is, on the whole, we like things to stay the way they are-even if we know something better is possible. We might not be living up to our full potential, we may

even be in a rut, but it's our rut and we're familiar with it. I really don't need or want God coming and messing around with it and creating some unforeseen or unexpected future because that's scary. If God can cure Mob what's God going to do with me? That's the way a lot of us think.

I've become addicted to the show Hoarders. I caught a marathon one Sunday afternoon and ever since I've been hooked. It's a show about Hoarders (of course). The people they show have houses filled with stuff from floor to ceiling. They can't walk through a hallway or into a room. They show people who have lost custody of their kids because their houses are too unsanitary to live in, so DFS has placed their children in foster care.

They showed one woman whose husband moved out when he fell and broke his hip trying to climb over her stuff, and 3 years later he still hadn't moved back because it was still unsafe and she had 45 birds living in the house. When the therapist asked her if it bothered her that husband couldn't move back in with her, she said yes-but she wasn't willing and able to do anything about the stuff and birds to make his move possible.

You can see in their heart of hearts that they know they need to change but they can't. Now I realize that in some cases they can't because there is a real mental illness that needs to be addressed, but in some cases they just don't want to move out of their comfort zones and their stuff is comforting even if it's consumed their lives.

But sometimes (most times) God calls us out of our comfort zones. And when God calls us, we don't always know what's next. Sometimes, you just have to step into the future in faith.

Donald, the author I mentioned earlier had his life changed when a man at the local church stepped out in faith-left his comfort zone-and asked Donald to write a column for the youth group newsletter. It was the first time, Donald said, that anyone had ever affirmed him-of anything! His life changed because one man at the local church responded in faith to a boy society had labeled a hood. But Instead of reacting in fear to some kid who looked and acted weird, the man from the local church stepped out of his comfort zone and responded in faith. Now, the boy who was known as "the kid without a Dad" was known as "the kid who can write really well" and went on to author a NYT best seller.

But even with a NYT bestseller Donald says, "I was filled with self pity," until he read about Desmond Tutu. Tutu, when asked whom he wanted to serve on the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, said he wanted victims to serve on the TRC, victims whose lives had been destroyed by apartheid. But, he said, I want them to be victims who have forgiven their oppressors. They cannot have self pity. They must be, Tutu said "wounded healers". Donald took Tutu's words as an invitation to take the wounds of his life and give back. But Donald also said, that his faith taught him that God can take the wounds of his life and heal the world with them. God can take the wounds of his life and heal the world with them.

Jesus tells Mob to stay in his hometown and tell everyone everything that God did for him. In essence, he tells Mob to take his wounds and heal the world. Perhaps, Jesus thinks, even though they are too scared to tolerate me, over time they'll learn to live with the witness of this man. Perhaps this is the only way my grace and mercy can get through to them.

I think the lesson here, and the question, is how can we, both in our personal lives and in our communal life confer on each other new and life giving names, and how can we strengthen and encourage each other to live into the open futures they represent? How can we do that for each other?

I'm not sure I have the answer, but I know that somehow that answer resides deep in our faith and that God has the power to create a new and better future. And that, just like Mob, we are called to tell everyone everything all that God has done for us.

Amen.