

# \*Named By Jesus

Luke 13:10-17

August 26, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

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I have a friend who is famous for the nicknames he assigns people. In fact, he rarely calls folks by their actual birth name. Instead, he calls them things like “turtle” or “bird-man” or “peaches.” Behind most of these names lies a funny story. When, for example, he found out that a kindergartener had once called my wife Heifer instead of Heather, as far as he was concerned we might as well have applied to have her name legally changed. Of course, these names were always intended as terms of endearment. When Tommy gives you a nickname, you know he is your friend.

There are other nicknames we assign to people that are less endearing. “Hey, chubby,” says one kid to another on the playground. The child with new glasses suddenly becomes known as “four-eyes.” “Here comes Miss Know-It-All,” utters one mother when her archrival enters the PTA meeting.

The names we assign to people say a lot about them and about us. When Heather was pregnant with each our daughters we spent hours pouring over books with thousands of baby names in them. With each name we wanted to know, “Where did it come from?” “What does it mean?” “How common is it?” “How many syllables does it have, and what does it sound like when you put it up against ‘Cadenhead?’” After all, we want our children to be able to spell their names before they graduate from middle school!

Our names do more than fill out a line on a birth certificate. They identify us to others and even to ourselves. It’s true that our oldest daughter never asked to be called Ashlyn. But even still she is most definitely an Ashlyn. It is as though all of creation has known since the beginning of time that she would be Ashlyn. Those six letters are now inseparably tied to who she is. Who is this blonde-haired one who loves to swim and hates to get up in the morning? She is Ashlyn, and no one can imagine her being anything else. So it is with you. You are Bob or Sandi or Slim because, well, that’s who you are. Like it or not, you are tied to the name you have been given.

A name is a powerful thing. In Bible times it was believed that to know someone’s name was to actually have a degree of control over them. Which of course is true. The next time you are in a crowded place and see your friend, Phil, across the way, try calling him Fred. No matter

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how loudly you call him he will ignore you. But call him Phil and the most amazing thing will happen. He will stop whatever he is doing and turn around to find you. By simply knowing his name you can influence his behavior.

That is why we get that very bizarre exchange between God and Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. God speaks to Moses and tells him to go down into Egypt to lead his people out of slavery. But Moses rightly anticipates a problem. As far as the Egyptians are concerned, there are lots of gods out there. So Moses asks, “What do I do if they want to know which god has sent me? Are you Higher-Consciousness or Self-Actualization? What shall I tell them is your name?”

But God also anticipates a problem. To know someone’s name is to have influence over them. Yet, this God isn’t like other gods. He is sovereign and free; He won’t be jerked around by anyone. So, here is what He tells Moses. You tell them “I Am” has sent you. That is my name – “I Am Who I Am,” which can also be translated, “I Will Be What I Will Be.” You see, unlike the rest of us, God names Himself. For us, our names are given to us by others, but God assigns himself his own name. And God’s very nature, His identity as the One who is free and sovereign over all things, is wrapped up in the name by which he makes himself known. It matters what we call someone.

In Luke 13 we read a story about a woman. The woman’s name is never given to us. Perhaps that’s not surprising, for in the ancient world women were generally not considered to be important enough to have identities of their own. We know the names of men like Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night, or of Zaccheaus who climbs up in the sycamore tree, but we don’t know this woman’s name. But that doesn’t mean we don’t know anything about who she is. She is the bent-over one. Luke tells us that for 18 years she suffered from a spirit that left her unable to stand up straight. For 18 years she has been “the crip,” or “that hunchback,” or “the crooked lady.” A disabled member of the lesser gender among a despised people in a forgotten corner of the Empire– that is who she was.

When I was in high school I volunteered a week of my summer each year to work as a counselor in a camp for children with cancer. I confess I did it mostly for a chance to meet

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female counselors who didn't go to my school and who therefore didn't know me as "the preacher's kid," or "that nerd." But I remember well what the camp director, Mrs. Frances, would tell us each year at the orientation meeting the day before the campers arrived. "Remember," she would say, "these kids are known as cancer patients everywhere they go. But this week, while they are with us, we want them to have the chance to be known as just kids."

It's a terrible thing to be named by something that really isn't you – your disease, your past, your economic status. You aren't "bipolar disorder;" you are so much more than that. You aren't "the divorcee." You are the you who just happens to be divorced. Here is a woman who most certainly has a name, and everything that comes with it – a history, a family, an identity. And yet all we know about her is that she is bent-over.

But Jesus knows more about her than that. He looks at her and sees what others cannot. "Should not this woman, this daughter of Abraham be set free?" he asks. And with those words Jesus does more than heal her disease. Yes, her spine is straightened, and for the first time in 18 years she can look others in the eye instead of only staring at her own dirty feet. But perhaps even more importantly Jesus renames her. With the sound of his divine voice she goes from being the crooked lady to being a daughter of Abraham. She goes from being only another victim to being an heir to the promise.

Abraham, you may remember, had also been renamed. When we first meet him he is only Abram, an old man with no children who will soon pass into oblivion and leave no one behind to even remember that he ever existed. But then God called to him and said, "I am going to make you the father of a great nation. Your descendants will outnumber the sands on the seashore, and through you the whole earth will be blessed." And with that, Abram became Abraham, the great-granddaddy of God's chosen people.

And now this woman, the one who for almost two decades had been known only by her infirmity, by her hunched back – she is known again as one who belongs to Abraham, and to Abraham's God, and to Abraham's God's promise.

It matters greatly what name we are called by, for our name gives us our identity, our self-understanding, our outlook on ourselves and the world around us. And the world has all

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kinds of names that it is ready to give us. Ever notice how often we are referred to as “consumers?” We are the ones who have “consumer confidence” or “consumer preference.” And we can read all about ourselves in “Consumer Reports.” Now there is an endearing name by which to be identified. Who am I? I am the one who consumes, which means my value can be easily measured by what and how much I consume. No wonder the poor among us, whose ability to consume is so greatly limited, feel worthless.

Beyond that the world will name us by the category into which we most easily fit. We are black or we are white. We are liberal or we are conservative. We are a builder or a boomer or a Gen-Xer. We are a victim or a patient or a client. We are a Braves fan or a Yankees fan (though it still confounds me how anyone could let *that* be said about them.) These labels are the world’s best attempt to say something meaningful about our identity.

And when you think about it, it is an incredibly efficient way to name people. If I can find the right label for you, then I don’t have to waste energy really knowing you; I just have to know the label I give you. It’s as though when I call you a Democrat or a Junior-Leaguer or a NASCAR fan I have said everything that is important about you.

Of course, if you are even a casual observer of human behavior – especially your own – you know that people are too complex to be named with any one label. What do you do with a Democrat who opposes abortion or a NASCAR fan who wouldn’t be caught dead with a beer in his hand? But even if we found the right label, or the right combination of labels, Jesus still works according to a different naming system. Jesus does not call us by any of the names the world assigns to us. His greatest desire is to call us son or daughter. He wants to name us child of promise.

We said that God is cautious about giving out his name, because he will not be jerked around. But he does give us his name. Through Jesus he reveals himself not as the great unmoved mover or as the distant abstract deity in the sky. He reveals himself as Abba, a Hebrew nickname by which a little child would call her daddy when she crawls in his lap at night for a bedtime story. The God hung the stars and set the planets in motion wants us to know him as papa. And through Jesus he reveals himself as the One who longs to know us not by what we do

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for a living or by our racial status or by our voting preference. He is our Abba-Father who longs to know us as “child of mine.”

This morning we have shared in the baptism of a believer. Because of the One whose death and resurrection these waters represent and because of the faith in Him her immersion in these waters symbolizes, she will no longer be known by any of the names the world gives her. She will longer be know by her grade-point average or by how much money her parents earn. She is no longer “just a teenager.” She has a new name. From hence forth, she shall be called Christian.

And so will all those who share the faith. For those who have joined themselves to Jesus Christ, those who find their one true identity in him, 1 John 3:1 says all that needs to be said: “How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

That ought to be enough to make anyone stand a little straighter.

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\* The central idea of this sermon was adapted from a sermon entitled “What’s In A Name?” preached by Dr. William Willimon at the Duke University Chapel on August 23, 1998.