



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“When the Mystery that moves the sun and the stars speaks your name in love...”

Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

Will Sparks April 8, 2012

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

What’s in a name? How did you get your name? Who gave it to you and how do you relate to it? Do you like your name? Are you happy to be called by your full name but a shortening would just not work for you? Katrina is fine but don’t dare call me Kitty. Ted works fine but don’t call me Theodore- that is territory reserved for when mother is annoyed. What’s in a name? Or perhaps the question is, what do we put into the names we use?

I believe that there is much in our names and that we shape our names and our names shape us. In some places in the world, naming is actually quite tightly controlled. In fact, the Pope recently issued a declaration against “silly names rooted in celebrity culture,” taking a stand against such wild ones as Brooklyn, Apple, and Ferrari. What is wrong with good Christian names, says the Pontiff. This article I was reading went on to talk about how hard it is to be creative in places like China where a couple recently was not allowed to call their baby the @ character. Unique, yes, and quite similar to the Chinese character for “love him” but not allowed. Just too weird.

I am pretty conservative in the naming department. I love names that evoke values and characters that we can live up to, names like Grace, and Hope. My middle name is Thomas, who doubted the resurrection of Jesus. Good name for a minister. Actually I do like it, because I am the kind of person that needs to ask the questions, needs to push ideas around before I will accept them. Call me a skeptic, call me a doubter, call me Thomas, but I work my way towards faith by wrestling with the questions. That is who I am. The name fits.

I love that Alexis’ middle name is Faith, not only because raising children these days requires it in spades, but to be named Faith is to embed the value in the very identity. It makes me wonder, on the day of her baptism, how she will live into that name.

And then there are the names we take on as we live, the names that life gives us and we accept as parts of our identity. In our gospel reading there was Mary and Peter, and that other unnamed disciple, most often referred to as “the other disciple.” Now usually that would be a major faux pas, but in this case it is ok, because “the other disciple” actually has a name given by life: “The one that Jesus loved.” Wow! There’s a name for you. That is even better than “The one that loved Jesus.” Leaving aside all the “he loved me better than you” questions that this name brings with it, can you imagine being that one? I wonder what it was like to go through life with that attached to your identity. You are the one he loved. When the lonely times come, “you are the one he loved.” When the struggles come, the persecution hits, the self doubt: “you are the one he loved. Don’t forget that. Don’t forget what he saw in you. There’s an accumulated name for you, a piece of identity that got attached at some point that shaped the bearer of the name.

And Mary. Mary who came to the tomb in the height of grief. The name life had given her in that moment was something like, “alone,” or “abandoned.” Maybe even victim, lost, hopeless. Her world was in tatters at losing Jesus, but even more-so when the body went missing. What kind of sicko would take the body away from a tomb? And so deeply immersed is she in these other names that she can’t recognize Jesus when he appears. But when he calls her by her original name, when he says to her, Mary, in a tone of recognition that speaks right to her soul,

she recognizes the voice, and the end becomes a beginning, the breach is repaired. The one utterly lost in grief finds a foot hold when her name is spoken in love. Everything is not gone. I am not actually victim, lost, abandoned. No, I am Mary, I am here, I am a soul with a name. When the mystery that moves the stars and the sun speaks her name in love she herself is brought back to life, she herself is resurrected, she herself is set free again to live.

We do accumulate these other kinds of names that fit us but don't tell the whole story of us. They tell part of our story. They speak to our accumulated self but not to our soul self, our original self, the blessed self that we call blessed at our baptism. We take on names like "cancer survivor," "gold medalist," "victim of abuse," "displaced person," "member of parliament," "child of divorce," "winner," "loser..." This is how we come to name ourselves over time

But this is resurrection day. This is Easter Sunday. This is the day we celebrate what happened that first day of the week when the disciples, and Mary in particular, came to deal with death and found life. And frankly I can't tell you just what happened that morning, because the only stories we have of that morning are shrouded in mystery and interwoven with layer upon layer of accumulated theology. And besides, remember, I'm Thomas- the guy who needs the rational explanation. So I can't tell you exactly. But what I can tell you because I have seen it with my own eyes is that in the midst of what life can throw at us, in the midst of all the accumulated names that shape our lives, if someone says to us, I see you, I can see you. I can see the soul at work behind your eyes, struggling for life. I can see you for the blessed child of God you are, if someone addresses our soul in love, at that moment, all the other names peel away- that is a moment of resurrection. Mary is brought back to life in that moment. We are brought back to life in that moment.

We are an Easter people, a people who believe in resurrection, a people who believe in the power of God to bring this world and everyone in it back to life- the God given life with a God given name, so that we will sing with Mary the song that eventually settles in her heart and mind and leads her to be the fiery disciple that she became...

I am a child of God.

Nothing can shake my confidence.

I am a child of God.

No one can take my inheritance

Never alone I'll stand, strengthened by God's own hand.

I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.