

Changing Clothes

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 20th, 2010
(Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39)

“. . . For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Well, as much as I wanted to believe what my sister told me in third grade about names never hurting me, it didn’t take long for me to realize that even though her intentions were right, the saying was utterly false. Better to quote the proverb this way, I thought, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will *always* hurt me.” Given the choice, I decided early on that I would rather be bruised and bloodied by sticks and stones than to be branded and shackled by names and labels.

Names are powerful. Find out someone’s name, and you have a measure of control over them. Diagnose an illness, and you have an idea about how to treat it. But names also hurt. Names stick like fly paper. Names limit what we believe about ourselves and how we behave. Names can define us, sometimes for a lifetime: Stupid. Fat. Plain. Skinny. Fag. Poor. Clumsy. Sissy. Dull. Smelly. Bucktooth. Short. I wonder, what was your name? And we’ve seen enough studies to know that if you put a child in a class for so-called “gifted” students she’ll score better on the same exam than if that same child believes she’s in a class with so-called “dummies.” In some sense, we are what we are named; and once the name is pinned on you, it’s practically impossible to shake it.

So, I’m thinking maybe this is one reason why some of us are not exactly crazy about attending class reunions this summer; we’ve spent most of our adult lives trying to find a new name, and we don’t need to be set back thirty-five years in the course of one evening. You see, the memory has but a short distance to reach those tender years when we became such skilled practitioners at inflicting emotional carnage on each other with names. And even though some of us, over the years since grade school, have learned to be more subtle with the name-calling, we often are not the least bit kinder with our lexicon of names.

I was driving northeast on Riverside Drive the other morning on the way to my favorite bakery, and as I stopped at the intersection at Cermak Road, a couple of young boys were riding their bikes on the street directly into the oncoming traffic that was stopped at the light. I noticed that the driver closest to them was trying to wave them off the street, cautioning them to get out of the traffic before the light changed. However, the man’s concerned efforts were returned by one of the boys, not surprisingly, with a string of obscenities while the two of them continued peddling down the middle of the street. The thing that stunned me about this incident was the name that the boy used to insult the grey haired driver—“Old.” “Shut your old mouth,” was what he said, although not quite so delicately.

Now, in most traditional societies, as I understand them, especially in the East, the aged are honored, esteemed, revered, but here, in our society, it seems, “old” is used to ridicule someone. That driver was not much older than me. Most of here today, if we’re over forty, are “old.” What people don’t see is that we are also fathers and mothers, children and grandchildren, husbands and wives, grandparents and teachers, coworkers and business men and women, and, more meaningful than all of this is that, as Paul writes to the Galatians, “. . .you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” But all we seem to be to each other is aged obscurity, worn out goods to be disposed of with everything else we throw in the trash. And because old has no value in our society, it is little wonder that we all pretend to be young. How silly we look and behave! How names can define our worth! As one of my favorite authors puts it, “. . . but of course if you have a wart on your forehead or on your nose it always seems that no one has a thing in

the world to do but look at your wart, make fun of it, and condemn you for it, though you might be the discoverer of America” (Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Idiot*).

One of the most refreshing things that one of you said to me a while back was, “I like being old.” I had to ask a second time what you had said because I just don’t hear it very often. But in Christ, we are all children of God through faith. We’ve been baptized. We’re clothed with Christ. We’ve been given Jesus’ name. It doesn’t matter what names others have given us, because we have been given the name of Christ so that “there is no longer Jew or Greek,” Paul writes in various places in his letters, “there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female,” and, I might add, there is no longer old or young. So, I wonder, why do you keep hanging out with people who are just like you? Your age. Your race. Your class. Why not take a leap of faith across some borders once in a while like Jesus does today when he goes to the country of the Gerasenes where he’s not going to find anybody like himself? In fact, the first person he meets when he steps foot on land is a man whom some would regard as hardly qualifying as a human being: “...For a long time [this man] had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” People, this is the Jesus whom we claim to be following as our Lord; look out where he may be leading you.

“What is your name?” Jesus asks. It’s the first thing that he says to the man maybe because to be human is to have a name. The man, who seems to have a Roman army at war within him, says that his name is “Legion,” for many demons, as many as a Roman legion of six thousand soldiers, seem to have entered him. The kid’s a real mess. His life was a living hell on earth, and he had the name to go with it.

You know, we have our own names for “Legion,” schizophrenic, sociopath, incarcerated; and, like the people in the country of the Gerasenes, we’ve found ways of restraining “Legion,” of keeping him in his place, we say, for his own good and for our safety. Like some of our own, this kid is so messed up that the people have put him in the cemetery, bound him with chains and shackles, with a security guard on duty 24-hours a day. You don’t have to think very long to realize that he’s a dead man walking, existing among the graves, living out his days behind prison bars. And, sometimes, the story says, “Legion” would even break loose, and the demons would drive him into the wilds.

“For a long time he had worn no clothes... .” For a long time he did not even have his own name, only the name, “Mob.” The man is defined by his name. Nobody really knows him, nothing about him, except the name “Legion.” Nobody really knows our names, really nothing about us, and we pretty much live out our lives, more or less, wandering nameless among the tombs. No one knows us, no one, that is, but the risen Jesus, who somehow breaks the chains for good, sends the demons reeling into the abyss where they belong (sorry for the pigs), and gives us new clothes and a new name to wear through Holy Baptism which, from the beginning, has been understood as exorcism of demons and the imparting of the Holy Spirit. “...For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” “To bathe in the Waters of Life,” wrote the poet William Blake, “To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human.”

An old friend of mine who worked for years in substance abuse treatment for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois used to say to me, “Most of the demons are inside... Memories of parental neglect or abuse of some sort are inside. Memories of childhood taunts and humiliations are inside. Living with the road not taken, whether career choices, romantic choices, or some other what-ifs are inside. Knowledge of one’s failures and imperfections are inside. All of these things,” he said, “and so much more can become demons that possess and even destroy.”

Before he became a Christian, the British writer and Oxford professor C. S. Lewis thought he was a pretty happy, reasonably good pagan, but then, this is what he saw: “For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose,” he writes, “And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion.” But now, no matter what happens—no matter where we may go, or what we may do, or what may be

done to us, or what names may be given to us—God will always love us as Christ, as his own beloved son or daughter, for “...there is no longer Greek and Jew,” Paul repeats in Colossians, “[there is no longer] circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”