



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 2 Proper 7 (C)

What's in a Name?

[RCL] 1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

In the 1590s, William Shakespeare penned the line, “What’s in a name?” as part of a longer soliloquy that Juliet speaks to herself. She discovers Romeo’s family name and is dismayed – the Montagues and the Capulets have been feuding for years. The boy she is interested in is expressly forbidden to her. And so, she begins to work it through. “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” she begins. As she goes on, the line comes out, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” As in – the name for something or someone doesn’t matter – it is one’s essence that makes a difference.

This line reverberates through these readings because of their connection to identity – to names and namelessness. What’s in a name?

The man we encounter in Luke’s gospel is never given a name. He is not introduced through a name or a family bloodline, but through how he is living. This man has been naked, living not in a house but in a graveyard, among the tombs. At times, those in the community have shackled him, tying him up with chains to keep him away from them and to keep themselves safe.

Despite this identity, despite the torment he has experienced, which our gospel says is his being possessed by demons, the man still comes to meet Jesus. Perhaps this is the first thing we really know about his identity – not about the chains which keep him bound or the demons who possess him – but about *him*. We know that the man has come to meet Jesus.

Jesus first asks his name, and he answers, “Legion.” This name is not his, but that of the demons inside him. Legion is not the name of the man, but the name of the chains which bind him. Legion doesn’t describe *him*, legion isn’t *his* essence.

After learning what constricts the man, Jesus has a conversation with the demons. In the end, Jesus gives the legion of demons permission to enter a herd of swine, causing the pigs to drown. This part of the story is violent; the demons are re-homed in unassuming livestock and the livestock are then killed in a way that

might seem cruel or wasteful to our modern ears. But this was the extraordinary measure taken to save this man. The lesson here might be that there is nothing too extraordinary for God when God is fighting for us. God is about our freedom from all things and in all things.

The people from the city hear about this miraculous occurrence and come to see what has happened. When they come to the scene, scripture tells us, “They were afraid.”

Let’s pause for a moment here. Before this moment, there was a man living on the outskirts of the city – a man who was naked, sometimes tied up, and living in a graveyard. That was what the people were used to. It was business as usual. Now, they have heard of something miraculous: that the man is no longer tormented by demons and has been cured. And indeed, when they come to find out for themselves, the man is sitting at Jesus’ feet. And yet it is here, after the miracle, after the healing, that they are afraid. When they realize what had happened, after the whole story about the demons and the pigs was told to them, they ask Jesus to leave, for they are seized with great fear.

When we think we know someone, it can be difficult to make room for a new identity. The people of the town didn’t know this man, but they were familiar with the legion within him. When that was taken away, a new identity shone forth. And because it was different, the townspeople were afraid.

I wonder – when have we been witness to the miraculous and then been seized with great fear? When have we been too afraid to see someone’s true identity shine through? When have we kept someone in shackles, tied to their old identity? When have we ourselves been bound to an outdated version of who we once were?

When Jesus is asked to leave, the man asks if he can come along. But Jesus sends him away, telling him to return home and to declare how much God has done for him. The encounter that Jesus has with this man gives him an identity. He may not have a name, but he is known to the living God. And being *known* by God is being *loved* by God.

The encounter with God sets him free. He is no longer confined to the outskirts of his community, forced into isolation but brought back into the fold. When he tries to go with Jesus, he is gently redirected, for it is in community that we become known as our true selves. It is in community that our identities are formed.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he refers to us as children of God. He calls us into our identity beyond our names, beyond the categories we turn to as ways of definition, claiming our belonging to God as the most important thing about us. In God, we are not divided from one another but drawn closer.

In God, the man who was tormented by demons isn’t confined to his place among the tombs. He is brought from a place of death and despair into his community, into the life of God’s people.

When we have an encounter with the living God, those things which torment us – those things which keep us shackled – fall away. Those demons – self-doubt, judgment, criticism of others – God calls out and gives us permission to be exactly who we are.

So, what's in a name? Not as much as we might think. Our identities are manifold, expansive, and individual. But one identity holds precedence over all the others. One identity calls us into a community of love and into relationship with a living God. That identity isn't one we have to earn or one we can lose. It stays with us from birth to death, no matter what paths we may have chosen: We are children of God.

Amen.

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