

Sermon

Pastor Kristy Daniels

January 1, 2023 – “Name of Jesus Sunday”

So, here we are. We continue in this short season of Christmas with the color white to remind us of holiness, and we continue to celebrate Emmanuel – God-with-us.

This Sunday, “Name of Jesus Sunday,” of course makes me think about names, and how they were chosen for us, and the names that are given to us. (I’ve always given thanks that I’m the one person in the family that *wasn’t* named after another family member, because I *know* the names that are left. So, just saying...)

Also, as a twin, I think I have a good grasp on the importance of names. I will still look up if somebody says “Jo,” because it could possibly be that they’re talking to me.

But what does your name mean? They’re so important, the names that we give things, the names we call ourselves. Sometimes the names we call ourselves inside of our heads – and sometimes out loud if we think people aren’t listening – aren’t very nice. We get that track in our head telling us that we’re ugly, or stupid, or tons of other things that aren’t true.

Sometimes we get glorifying in our head, you know? I don’t have to name those names. I think we can name those ourselves.

What do they mean? Names can be cruel, and dismissive. And life-taking. Or they can be affirming and help us identify something for what it really is. It could be what we *need* them to be.

We know names are important. I’ve heard stories, especially at seminary, of one of my professors who accidentally baptized a child the wrong name. And this was a good lesson to really pay attention when you’re doing a baptism! And the family was so impacted by that, and what they believed about baptism, that they legally named their child this new name.

What do our names mean for us? And what is the importance of it? Here Jesus is named “Jesus” because the angels say that is what his name is to be. He is the one who has come into the world for your sake, for the sake of all creation. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us. He came into the world that we might be given a *new* name. As we are baptized into the waters, we are put to death and raised to new life as children of God, our new name: Beloved Child of God.

So those voices in our head, they are no longer correct or right; they never were. But now it’s confirmed. When God created, in the beginning, one of the most powerful things God did was to give things a name. It’s no small thing, that you have been named Child of God, Beloved, that you have been created and seen and called Good; that you have been gifted and fed and nourished and called and gathered; where we become something with a new name, the Body of Christ.

One of the names we give ourselves in a community such as this is “Christian,” and that name has been tarnished out in the world. People have taken it for themselves and used it as a weapon against others. Jesus says, “I came for you that you might know life, and life in my name.” Life, in the name of Christ, with the name Beloved Child of God, is a life of repentance, forgiveness and love. It is a life where we value the name that we have been given, where we work so that others may know that name is theirs as well. Where none are forsaken or forgotten or maligned, or mis-named.

When I was thinking about names, and I was thinking about my congregation, and my own family, of course, my sister finally changed her name to what it’s always been her whole life, instead of what my parents gave her. And it was so – she didn’t do it for years and years, because she thought it would be very hurtful to my mother. But she hated having to go by her name at work, because she’s in security at an airport and you have to use your legal name. You cannot use any other name. And she hates that name! And I can’t even tell you what it is, because she would hear about it and come beat me up. So, her name is Jo. And now that’s legally her name. And that is who she is.

And I think about my congregation and these people that come, and end up on the streets from all over the world, and how I can’t pronounce their names correctly, and how hurtful that must be; and how we have to change and make things easier for those of us who have “stiff tongues.” And sometimes I can try and make a joke of it and make it lighter and ask them to help me say it correctly, or is there something else I can call you, and I know how life is sucky, how “taking” from someone that is, but after trying for months to say someone’s name, and never having them look up when you don’t have it correct...yes! What does that mean? What are we taking from people, when we can’t learn and say and respect the beauty of someone’s name?

So here we are, with this new name that we can say with our lips, that we can say with our hearts, that we can see in one another. You are a Beloved Child of God, your name spoken, and known, cherished. If I were your pastor and knew all of your first names today, I would say your given name as I gave you the Body that has been broken for you. A benediction, a blessing, unknowing.

Ever remember the first time in your life that you heard your name said with love, and it became a beautiful thing? Hopefully you’ve heard your name that way. That’s how God says it to you.

So I want you to embrace your given name, the name that God gives you, and all that it means, here as a valued and valuable part of God’s creation. We’re invited to this table to feast on the meal prepared for each of us, strengthened and nourished so that we can go out into the world and see with new eyes, the creation that has been prepared for us, the creation we have been put in place to care for, the creation that will endure, because it belongs to God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.