

“Naming and Claiming” A Sermon based on Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29 and Luke 3:15-17; 21-22 delivered on Sunday, January 12, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

Names are powerful things. In our Isaiah passage this morning we are reminded of this. As the people of Israel are about to be released from captivity in Babylon, the author of Second Isaiah comforts them by quoting God as saying, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1c) Because God names and claims the people of Israel as his, the people will be saved. In the same way, when Jesus is baptized (Luke 3:21-22) the Holy Spirit descends upon him and God's voice from heaven names and claims him in these powerful words, "You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Later in Luke, in Chapter Four, we hear of the power this has given Jesus, when the scriptures tell us: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country." (Luke 4:14) Being named and claimed by God through the Holy Spirit gave Jesus the power and authority to do his work in this world.

We should not be surprised at this. For all oral traditions of ancient civilizations give great power to the activity of naming things. In Native American folklore, for instance, the Coyote stories speak of this naming activity with the same sense of power. The Spirit Chief, the story goes, calls the Animal People together before the "New People" (humans)

come to live on earth and says: "Some of you have names now, some of you haven't, but tomorrow all will have names that shall be kept by you and your descendants forever. In the morning as the first light of day shows in the sky, come to my lodge and choose your names. The first to come may choose any name that he or she wants. The next person may take any other name. That is the way it will go until all the names are taken. And to each person I will give work to do." When Coyote oversleeps and comes late to the lodge of the Spirit Chief, he must keep the name he already has, much to his distress—for he wanted a more powerful name, like bear or eagle. So the Spirit Chief must explain the situation in these words: "Coyote, you must keep your name. It is a good name for you. You slept long because I wanted you to be the last one here. I have important work for you, much for you to do before the New People come. You are to be the chief of all the tribes." Coyote has been named and claimed by the Spirit Chief, and in that process he has been given the power to perform great things. And if you know Coyote stories, that power is sometimes used for good and sometimes used for mischief!

Names are not just labels then—something to call something or someone by. Within the name of a thing is the essence of the thing. Within the name of a person is the power to be that person. The theologian and author, Frederick Buechner, in his well-loved and much quoted book, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC, states it this way:

“Buechner

It is my name. It is pronounced Beekner. If somebody mispronounces it in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that it's I who am forgotten. . . .If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell somebody my name, I have given him a hold over me that he didn't have before. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since, (p. 12)”

Most of us are parents and intuitively know this. When we address our children, and we really want them to pay attention don't we use ALL of their names? I still sit up straighter in my chair when I hear my Mother's voice in my head, "Alison Andrea Dutton, you come right here, right now!" There was much power in that! When I taught an After School program a few years ago, I was blessed with a set of identical twin boys. Except for some distinctive freckles on the nose of one of the twins, there was no way to tell them apart. They looked alike, they acted alike, they talked alike, and they misbehaved alike! I had no power to get them to listen to me or to follow my directions until I could call them by name. Once I learned the trick of telling Matthew and Steven apart, I was able to get them to listen to me—solely because I could call them by name.

I can think of no better graphic example of the power of naming things than the story of the young Helen Keller, as portrayed in the movie “The Miracle Worker.” Kneeling by the front yard pump, Helen

holds out her hand as her teacher, Annie Sullivan, pumps water over it, while, at the same time, making the sign for "water" in the palm of her other hand, and then moving that hand to her lips and throat as she vocalizes the word "water." And, then, it still gives me shivers as I tell the story, we hear Helen for the first time making the connections between the three things: the wetness on her hands, the movement of Annie's lips, and the sign language, as she tentatively for the first time is able to name something in her own voice! There is never a dry eye in the house at this point because all of us know that this is the moment of a most significant breakthrough in Helen's education. The moment that Helen's teacher has been waiting for for so long—the moment when Helen can finally put a name to something! And then, we laugh and cry along with the characters on the screen as they careen around the yard and house in a frenzy to name each object and each person. Naming is power. for Helen Keller who went on to be an internationally renowned writer, lecturer, and consultant. The very act of naming WAS the miracle!

Names claim us in ways we all can relate to. They have the power to hurt or heal—to spur us on to new action and new heights of human endeavor or to drag us down. When racial slurs and ethnic jokes are used, or when we call people by negative names, our names affect that person's activities in a negative way. When we use titles and names that

are positive, they build people up and can encourage them to a life of success.

So, what does all of this mean for us here in this church—we who have been named and claimed by God, a God who is described in Psalm 29:4 as having a “powerful” voice. A God who claimed us by this powerful voice to be saved through his only son, Jesus', life and death on a cross? It means a lot, I think. This gathered community of faith calls itself by the name "Christian." As such, certain actions follow from claiming this as our name. Our job description, so to speak, is contained in the power of this name, because everything that we do while we are here in worship and everything that we do when we leave here to go out into the world—for good or for bad, for better or for worse—as Christians, is done in Christ's name. Frederick Buechner, in a sermon entitled "The Two Stories" speaks powerfully to this dynamic of being named and claimed by Christ. He relates our own individual stories with Jesus' story, "Our stories," he says "are at best a parody of Jesus' story. We are the fragrance of Christ. . . like the fragrance of the sea from ten miles inland when the wind is in the right direction. . . Yet they meet as well as diverge, our stories and his, and even when they diverge, it is his they diverge from, so that by his absence as well as by his presence in our lives we know who he is and who we are and who we are not." And Buechner goes on to say some more that gives us hope as people who

name ourselves as "Christian." He says, "We have it in us to be Christs to each other. . .through the holy stories of us all."

And so, when we hear the story of Christ's baptism, we realize that it is our story, too. When we are baptized, we symbolically stand next to Christ at the Jordan river, we feel the water swirling around our bodies, we hear our name being called along with his and we know in our heart of hearts that what Jesus heard that day from the voice of God, we also hear, "You are my child, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." We, like Christ, are thus named and claimed by God, just like the people of Israel were by the waters of Babylon, when God simply says: "I have called you by name, and you are mine.". It is just that simple. It is just that powerful. Amen.

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