

## OUR TRUE NAME

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We’ve all heard that saying, right? Maybe we’ve even used it a few times as a form of defense against people who said mean and nasty things to us.

When I was a young boy, besides being the shortest kid among my friends, I was also overweight. I used to hate going with my mother to shop for clothes, because I always had to look for what was called back then “husky”-sized pants. It was a painful thing for me; but not nearly as painful as some of the names I was called at times, “Fat Pig” being the most malicious of them.

“Words will never hurt me?” I don’t think so. Actually, I believe, from first-hand experience, that words can hurt a person even more than sticks and stones can. And name-calling can cause more pain than a punch to the stomach or the jaw can. The good news is, the opposite is also true. When you call someone a complimentary name, a name that praises and expresses approval, it can build a person up and assure them of their value and worthiness as a human being.

Whether we have self-esteem issues and are insecure about ourselves, or have all the confidence in the world and an ego the size of Mount Katahdin, we all yearn for positive words of affirmation and encouragement. We want the names people call us to hold up or reflect the best, most esteemed and respected parts of who we are. Because the names we’re called or we call people do have an impact, positive or negative, for the better or for the worse.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, we read about a woman. The NIV Bible we use describes her as “crippled.” How would you like to be remembered that way? This woman was bent over, and had been bent over, staring at the ground, her back terribly contorted, for many years. Eighteen years, to be specific. Interestingly, she didn’t appear to have a name to anyone in town.

When people saw her coming, shuffling down the street, her spine curved and her eyes attempting to look up from the ground so she could see where she was going, they didn’t say, “Here comes Mary,” or, “Look, it’s Elizabeth.” They said, “Here comes that bent-over woman, the crippled woman.” That was her name to everyone in town who encountered her; and her destiny, her whole sad fate would be inescapably tied to that name—“crippled woman”—for the rest of her life.

The woman we read about in Luke this morning didn't have a name, other than the one given to her by the town—a name based on her disability. She didn't have an identity other than that of a victim. It seems that she didn't have a family or an occupation; she had nothing except her deformity. She was simply the one who was always stooped over, and seemed to carry on her shoulders an invisible yet very heavy burden: the burden of being different, of not looking like everyone else, of not being able to do what everyone else is does. She was the crooked woman, the crippled woman.

I think she's there in the Gospels to represent everyone who is also named and labeled: people like those who are called "a druggie," "a drunk," "stupid," "ugly," "mental case," "freak," "fatso." I could go on, but you get the point. This bent over woman had an encounter with Jesus; and, praise be to God, Jesus healed her. That's wonderful. Probably for the first time in her adult life, she was able to stand up straight and look straight ahead. Jesus restored her to what we would call "normalcy."

But just as wonderful as what Jesus did for her was the way Jesus spoke to her, what Jesus said about her, and what Jesus called her. He didn't call her crippled or incapacitated; he didn't identify her by her physical limitation or address her as being a victim. Jesus didn't allow her disability to define her life and who she was as a person. Instead, Jesus called her "a daughter of Abraham." That's a unique term, and it's found in only one place in Scripture: right here in this particular story. And it's incredibly significant.

So, what does the term "daughter of Abraham" mean?

Well, do you remember who Abraham was? You could say that he was the "great-granddaddy" of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, God made a promise. God promised to make a great nation out of him, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Jesus identified this bent over, physically disabled woman as a daughter of that very Abraham. She was an heir to the promised blessings of God.

Just imagine what it must have been like for her, when she heard Jesus call her that name: daughter of Abraham. Think of the thrill, the joy, the gratitude she must have felt when Jesus identified her, not by the infirmity she suffered on the outside, but for who she actually was on the inside, in God's gracious eyes. To Jesus, she was so much more than the superficial, cruel, limiting labels that others imposed on her. That woman, even though she was bent over and physically restricted, was still part of God's great salvation plan for the world.

And so it was that the bent over woman stood up straight. And I believe that even if her back had never been healed by Jesus, she still would have held her head up high; because as a newly declared daughter of Abraham, she had been redeemed by the glorious promise God made to all of God's people. Her life had been renamed and redefined by Jesus, and she went from being a victim of sorrow, loneliness and limitations, to a participant in the grand story of God's salvation. And now she would forever be remembered, not as a sad casualty of the random cruelty of life, or as a frequently seen around town yet pretty much unknown, bent over, crippled woman, but as one of God's beloved. And all it took was Jesus calling her by her one true name: daughter of Abraham.

The great writer and preacher Fred Craddock once told a story about taking a trip to the Deep South, and encountering a man in a restaurant. Somehow the man, who was finishing up his lunch a few tables away, sensed that Craddock was a man of faith; so he strolled over to and said, "You're a preacher, aren't you?" Somewhat embarrassed, Craddock said, "Yes."

The man pulled up a chair and sat beside Craddock. "Preacher," he said, "let me tell you a story. When I was a little boy, my childhood was sad and lonely. Life was tough because my mama had me, but she wasn't married. Do you know how a small Tennessee town treats mothers like that? Do you know the names that neighbors, school kids and even church-going Christians call kids who don't have a father?

"We never went to church, and nobody asked us to. But one night there was a tent revival not very far from our home, and my mama decided we were going to go to it. I didn't want to go, but there was no arguing with her. We walked into this large, ragged tent, and there was this big, tall preacher who looked so strong and ornery that I think he probably could've arm-wrestled the devil himself and won. He was standing up front, dressed in black. He preached with a booming, thunderous voice that I swear shook the whole tent and everyone in it.

"Mama and me sat toward the back. Well, that preacher got to preaching, about what exactly I don't even remember now, and he was stalking up and down the aisle under that tent like he was looking for a fight. It was something to see. After the sermon, we were trying to slip out discreetly so we wouldn't have to bump into any of the name-callers in our town; but that big preacher could move pretty fast, and somehow he got to the exit before us and I felt his big hand on my shoulder. I was terrified.

He stared down at me, looked me straight in the eye and asked, 'Boy, your daddy isn't with you. How come? Who's your daddy?'

“Well, I didn’t want to admit that there wasn’t any daddy—he had been out of my life since before I was born. But I had no idea at all what to tell him that would satisfactorily answer his question, and I didn’t really want to lie to a man of the cloth, so I just stood there, looking up at him, my mouth open and my eyes wide, and didn’t say anything at all.

“Finally the preacher said, loud enough for everyone around to hear, ‘I know who your daddy is, boy. You’re a citizen of the Kingdom, and you’ve been bought with a price. You’re a child of God. Don’t ever forget it.’

“I was never the same after that, Preacher. Him calling me a child of God changed my life completely. I didn’t see myself the same anymore. For the first time ever I realized that I was loved and accepted. I was somebody. I was one of God’s beloved. Preacher, lots of people need to hear that. They need to be told who they really are: precious children of God. Preach that to them and you and God will transform many souls for the better.”

The man pulled his chair away from the table. He extended his hand and introduced himself. Fred Craddock said the name was familiar. Then it came to him. That man was a well-known, former governor of the state of Tennessee.

Jesus wants to retitle us. Like the bent over woman he healed, Jesus won’t allow us to be limited by the names the world wants to label us with. We’re sons and daughters of Abraham. That means, with God as our Father, our lives matter to the Lord, and that’s imperative to hear for those who are convinced that their lives don’t matter much, if at all.

Many of you have seen me officiate at baptisms here in our church. When I baptize a baby, I ask the parents by what name their child will be baptized. After the parents say the name, I repeat it as I sprinkle water on the child’s forehead and I say, “The Holy Spirit be upon you, Child of God, Disciple of Christ, and new member of the church.”

Those three names really boil down to just one name: Christian. And for the newly baptized child and new Christian, we in the church pray that his or her life will be a continual story of being called by that one true name, growing into that name, personifying that name, and living into God’s gracious plans for him or her.

Yes, like the woman Jesus healed in this morning’s Gospel reading, we’re all daughters and sons of Abraham. And whatever other negative name we may be called, by others or by our own harsh, critical, self-judging inner voice, Christ wants us to remember that, by our baptisms, we’re children of God, and our true name is “Christian.”

Thank be to God. Amen.