

January 1, 2012

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me; so goes the old playground rhyme of defense. But the fact is that names can hurt and names can carry power and names can define.

In the Harry Potter series, Harry is the first person to regularly refer to Voldemort by name; everyone else calls him, "He who shall not be named." Their reasoning was that by avoiding his name, they would avoid calling forth the evil power that name wielded. Harry's rational was that by saying the name you stripped away that power, making it simply a name like any other name.

A name is the one thing we have when we come into this world, and it is the one thing we have when we leave it. Some names have significance, some names are made significant. My name, Todd, is an old English word for fox. Joelene's name was created to signify her connection to her dad, Joel. Other names seem to be owned by one particular person or identity: Prince, Kermit, Aretha, Abe, Judas, Benedict, Kareem.

Names, not surprisingly, also have significance in the Bible. The Hebrew name for spirit is ruach. When you say that word, there is a bit of exhalation. That's important because it's akin to the breath of God. The spirit of God is in that name.

We originally meet the patriarch of the Israelites as God calls him out of Ur. His name is Abram. His wife's name is Sarai. Abram's name is eventually changed to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah. The pronunciation changes to reflect the spirit of God, the breath of life, as now part of their being.

When God tells Abraham that his wife will have a baby, she laughs. Their son's name, Isaac, sounds like the Hebrew word for laughter. Later, at the birth of Jacob, he is given that name because Jacob sounds like the word for heel or supplants. If you remember, Jacob was born holding the heel of his brother Esau and supplanted him as most favored by stealing his birthright. And eventually Jacob grows up, wrestles with a mysterious man of God and has his name changed to Israel, or one who strives with God.

So you see, names are important. Names have power to influence and control. Names have power to build up and tear down. It's not just proper names that do this, but descriptive names given by one person or group of people to another person or group of people. Think about how we name our enemies during wartime. Think about the derogatory names we, as the dominant white society, have given to black, hispanic and Native American minorities. Or think about the names we give to unwed mothers, long-term unemployed, street people and political enemies. We are good at assigning names in an effort to tear down and discredit people. We are good at assigning names to whole groups of people in order to keep our place of privilege and power over "Those People."

Here's a bit of derogatory trivia for you: the word faggot is a derogatory name society has given

to a whole class of people. The original meaning of that word was for a bundle of sticks gathered together to be burned as fuel. It's no accident that that word was given to a group of people that most of society wanted to see eliminated as easily as burning sticks.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me. Really? How do children respond when they are constantly put down and belittled through name calling? How do we respond when we are constantly referred to through the use of a derogatory name? What does it do to us when we refer to others with derogatory names, either intentionally or unintentionally?

The dominant society or class will try to dictate the names we give to "Those Others." But just because we are members of that dominant class doesn't mean we have to play along. We can choose to use names that buildup rather than tear down. We can choose to remember the promise we make when renewing our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being. We can choose to emulate the one whose name is above every other name, the name of Jesus.

Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua, which means, "The Lord saves/helps." Joshua also has the spirit of God built into it with that "H" sound that I spoke of earlier. Notice what Jesus does with names.

He finds twelve men, some fishermen, a hated tax collector, a terrorist and several others and never once lays on them the baggage or negativity that society dictated be used. When the woman showed up at dinner and anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, Simon the Pharisee named her, "Sinner." But Jesus elevated her from that named status and put her on equal footing with Simon.

When a woman was dragged before Jesus with the derogatory name Adulteress cascading down on her, Jesus refused to participate in using a name to justify his place of privilege. Instead, he equated the name being thrust upon her, Adulteress, with any other sin committed by those around her, showing them to be equal sinners and also in need of forgiveness.

Names have power. Names can tear down or build up. Names can define who we are and how we see others. On this feast day of the Holy Name, when a boy was officially given the name that helps and saves, I ask you to pay attention to the names you use. On this day of the Holy Name, I urge you to find names that treat all people with dignity and respect, and to take a stand against using names that attempt to belittle and tear down. On this day of the Holy Name, I ask you to begin looking for holy names of Others that recognize we are all holy because the breath of God lives within every one of us.

Amen.