

## **What Is Your Name?**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
in Fremont, California,  
on November 12, 2017, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.  
Scripture: Luke 16:19-31 and Mark 5:1-20  
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My father's name was Daniel Dean Loreman. When I think about who he was, he never seemed like a Daniel; he was usually called Dan as an adult by friends and colleagues, and was often Danny as a boy and youth. His family, though, called him Bug (sounds like "boog"), which, yes, was short for booger. The people who could tell me why he had that nickname are gone now, and I'm not sure I really want to know the reason. Even his mother, my grandmother, called him Bug. And pretty much everyone in the family had a nickname. I was a teenager before I ever realized my aunt—my Dad's sister, and the only girl among the four siblings—was named Mary Beverly. She was called Bev by her friends, but her family always called her Sis. To the day she died, I never called her anything but Aunt Sis.

The Loreman habit of giving everyone a nickname drove my mother crazy. She was named Rosemary Ann Hartwick, because her father's mother's name was Rose and her mother's mother's name was Mary. People—especially Dad's family—wanted to shorten it to Rosie, which she hated. For most of her life, she insisted on being called Rosemary.

So when it came time to name me, my mother knew she wanted to find a name that didn't have a diminutive nickname associated with it. She didn't want to name me Jennifer, and have people call me Jenny, or turn Laura into Laurie. Thankfully, she didn't choose to name me after my grandmothers, or my name would have been Gladys Nola; instead she chose Brenda, and so I have always been.

I know not everyone likes their given name, but I have always liked mine. It's familiar enough that people always know how to say it, but unusual enough that I never had to compete with other Brendas in my classes growing up. My oldest friend, Kay, has gone by her middle name for most of her life, because there were just too many Karens in her elementary school classrooms.

Our names are more than just labels. Our names have a story, and are part of our story. We identify with our names; in a sense, we are our names. We are intimately tied to our names in ways that are powerful and even rather mysterious. They are an important part of how we see ourselves and how the world sees us. One of the quotes I came across while preparing the order of worship this week was one attributed to W.C. Fields, who said, "It ain't what they call you, it's what you answer to."

What I answer to has shifted over the years as my vocation—and how I identify myself—has shifted. When I was teaching at a large public high school, most of the people I saw every day called me Ms. Loreman. Being called Ms. Loreman meant that I had a particular role and a certain kind of authority in the school environment. Now that I'm a minister, I answer to a different name. Although some people call me Reverend Loreman, most often people here call

me by my first name, or by Pastor Brenda. I have a different role, and have a different way of being called.

My cousin, whose name is Melinda Lucille, has always answered to Mindy. About the time she graduated from college and started her professional life, I read an article about women in business and how important it was to have a professional-sounding name; the article suggested that women stop using their nicknames and become Elizabeth instead of Lizzie, or Susan instead of Susie. I asked my cousin if she had considered this, and whether she would use Melinda as her professional name. She told me that she wasn't a Melinda, she was a Mindy, and there was no point in launching herself as someone she wasn't.

My friend Eli'jah Carroll was given the name Cheryl at birth, a name that matched the female gender he was assigned. But it didn't match the male person he felt he was inside, and, as he transitioned to living into his male identity, he tried on different names until he found the one that fit his emerging sense of self. "I woke up one morning," he said to me, "and knew I was Eli'jah, as though I had dreamed it." And so he has become.

Last week, I talked about how questions can be either closed-ended, with a definite or implied answer, or open-ended, without any one answer. Sometimes a question can be both, depending on the context. "What are you looking for?" can be closed-ended when you're in the grocery store, and open-ended when you're pondering your life's direction.

I think "What is your name?" is another of those potentially complex questions. When you go to pick up your tickets at the will-call window at the theater, and the ticket-seller asks, "what is your name?" it's a pretty closed-end question. But when Jesus asks the question, it's a different matter. When Jesus asks the question, it's an invitation to intimacy; to know another's name is the beginning of relationship.

It's why we wear nametags here at Niles Discovery Church. We don't want to be a place where people fade into the background. We want to be a community rooted in relationship. And the first step to that is knowing each other's names.

"It is almost axiomatic that nothing is as musical to the ear as the sound of one's own name. If that is true, it is not from sheer vanity. Rather, we long to be addressed, for words to find us where we live. Each of us wants to be recognized as an individual. We yearn to be known and known by name."<sup>1</sup>

Over and over again in scripture, we are told that God calls us each by name. In Exodus, God says to Moses, "You have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."<sup>2</sup> In Isaiah, God tells the exiles, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; / I have called you by name, you are mine."<sup>3</sup> And in the Gospel According to John, Jesus says, "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his

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<sup>1</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 33:17, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 43:1, NRSV.

own sheep by name and leads them out.”<sup>4</sup> What a welcome assurance, that God knows us, calls us by name, and seeks to be in relationship with us.

In our first scripture reading, Jesus tells the parable that is commonly known as the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Note that this Lazarus is not the same as the Lazarus that Jesus raises from the dead—that story is in the Gospel According to John, and is a healing story, not a parable. Different Gospel, different story, same name—which I think, is what’s important here.

As Jesus begins the parable, he says, “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.” What’s interesting to me in this story is that the rich man is unnamed, but the poor man has the name Lazarus, which means, “God helps.” Think about that for a moment. The rich man is not given a name. In the society of Jesus, as in our own day, rich people’s names are usually known—and known well. I bet you could name off ten very wealthy people in ten seconds, but would be hard pressed to say the names of ten beggars you have encountered. I know I would.

But here, Jesus upends our expectations by flipping the story’s narrative and giving a name to the one who is marginalized, and leaving the rich man nameless. God, who helps Lazarus where the rich man will not, knows the beggar by name. To the rich man, the beggar is a nameless person to be ignored and marginalized. But in the realm of God, God names and claims each of us, including—and especially—those who have been marginalized in the world.

The importance of naming is seen again in the dramatic encounter between Jesus and the man possessed by an unclean spirit in our second reading from Mark’s gospel. The author says that the man is possessed by demons, but his behavior could be that of a man with serious mental illness. Whatever he has, the poor man is clearly suffering. He has been marginalized by his community and now lives among the dead in the graveyard. Even chains cannot contain him in his raving.

When the man sees Jesus at a distance, he runs to Jesus and bows down before him, and Jesus asks him that most important question: “What is your name?” This is the question that one human being asks another. It is an invitation to relationship. “This man has been exiled from his community and has been left for dead. We can only imagine how long it has been since he has been asked his name. Probably he has not been asked for all the time he has been tormented, and that in itself has added to the torment. During his time of distress he has been known by labels rather than by a name: a madman, a demoniac, a dangerous beast. But Jesus asks, ‘What is your name?’ Under these circumstances, the question sounds like nothing less than an invitation to life, the first step in healing.”<sup>5</sup>

The man replies that his name is Legion, which is another symbolic name. A legion was a Roman army unit of six thousand men. And these soldiers were the brutal oppressors of those living in occupied first-century Israel. When he tells Jesus that his name is Legion, he is testifying to the torture and destructive force his illness has in his life.

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<sup>4</sup> John 10:3, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Copenhaver, 32-3.

Once cleansed of his illness and in his new clothes and right mind, the man begs to follow Jesus. But Jesus has another idea. He tells that man to go back to his home and family and share the story so that they can see the transformation for themselves. I imagine him beginning his story, filled with the assurance that he is named and called by God, saying to them, “The first thing Jesus did was to ask me, ‘What is your name?’”