

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8. June 28, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods  
Mark 5:22-43 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Names tell us about people, don't they? This year about 120 million babies will be born, and every one of these babies that survives will be given a name – it is a fundamental truth that we name human beings. And when we name them, when there is the giving and receiving of a name its an event of major importance.

Often, the significance of names is emphasized by elaborate rituals that almost always have deep religious meaning. In our tradition, names are conferred at baptism - the most central, most important rite of our faith. Adult candidates – who already have names conferred legally on their birth certificates – often take a new name – a “Christian name” to mark out this new identity. Sociologically, this giving of a name in baptism serves basically the same purpose as naming ceremonies in preliterate societies.

The effect is the same in both cases: the person who receives a name thereby receives an identity and a place within the society. Names tell us who we are and offer us belonging, a place to be.

With that name there comes into being what scholars call a “symbolic name contract” – it requires that the society recognize and provide for the needs of individuals, at least in a general way.

When a society fails to do – or when people feel that their society has failed to do that – then you see people changing their names. An example would be those African-Americans who changed their names from the ones they had received – based on the pre-Civil War slave culture – to ones from Africa because they felt the failure and sought some symbolic way of abandoning the identity on which that original social contract was based.

When that sort of thing happens it should be a clue to the rest of us that “Houston, we have a problem,” and that problem is not with the name-changers, but with our society as a whole, which has failed them.

There's a flip-side to this, too, the other side of the name contract – the individual's side. By receiving a name and using it, the individual implicitly accepts membership in the society and agrees to follow its rules and customs. Break the law, go to jail, and you are forced to exchange your name for a number. Society says, in effect, that the convicts have broken the contract with civilization that their names imply. They have separated themselves from the community by breaking the rules; thus, they are no longer entitled to the identity and social privileges their names give them.

Names are not casual, regular, unimportant – they're highly significant and symbolic of the person who bears them. Get someone's name wrong and at the very least you've committed a major faux pas – do it intentionally and you could start a fight, because to do so is intentionally to demean the person, to suggest they are less than fully who they are. Martin Luther referred to one of his opponents – Dr Eck – as Dr. Dreck, because the word “dreck” means “filth.”

When we mis-use names, or use other names, it's about what we think of them. This is especially true an individual is addressed by their group or ethnic origin. When a Nazi spoke to a Jew not by his or her name but by saying "You, Jew," or when a white slave owner spoke a black person as "You, nigger" that was both a dismissal of their human identity and an expression of power and control – the power of life and death. These people were, in the speaker's view, less than human, not equal.

That brings us to today's Gospel – a passage from Mark. Does anyone know the name of Jairus' daughter? How about the woman with the hemorrhage of blood? What about the woman with the alabaster jar in Mark 14 - that passage lies in our future? Do you remember what Mark reports Jesus as saying about her? "I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." But not her name.

This is especially striking, because elsewhere Mark names many women, which is one of the things that makes his Gospel – and all the others, as well as Paul's authentic letters – so remarkable. Women have names! They're part of the new society that Jesus speaks of so eloquently.

Yet other parts of the New Testament reflect the subservient, non-person role that 1<sup>st</sup> Century culture forced on women. The so-called "household codes" of the non-Pauline Pastoral Epistles, Ephesians and Colossians see women as essentially subservient, silent, barefoot, and pregnant.

Here with these few women today there's that bias toward seeing women in general as useful only because they carry the story of Jesus forward. Here they have no names. Here, there's no social contract for them. They're non-persons, less-than-fully-human, useful for a variety of tasks, but not much more.

Now I bet you're saying "but that was then, this is now!" At least, you're more likely to be saying that if you're a man. And, frankly, when we live in the dominant part of a culture – and many of us here do live there – we often can't see the problem. Dominant cultures have very subtle ways of reinforcing their power and control, and unless we're aware of it then it's all too easy for us to get sucked in and not even notice it.

One of those ways is violence, especially when our dominant position is threatened. In a few years white will no longer be the dominant color in our nation. The events in South Carolina ten days ago represent just such a fearful dominant cultural response .

Today violence – actual, emotional, psychological, financial, you name it – violence against sub-dominant cultures in our nation is rising. Violence against women, gays and lesbians (no matter what the Supreme Court says), African Americans, non-Christian religions. Symbolically, these are attempts to 'un-name' all of them and so many more, to say "you are less than human, not worthy of being included in our social contract, good for very little."

What does the gospel have to say to us today? Well, when the woman with the hemorrhage touched Jesus, he had every right, as a good Jew and a man, to reject her for breaking a

fundamental social taboo, breaking the purity laws, violating the Law of Moses. Instead he said this: ““Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” He recognized her humanity, treated her as family, offered her peace and wholeness, and, perhaps most importantly, restored her into her community.

The cure is the outward sign of an inward transformation.

For me, this is the power of this story, that the choice of this man was not to act out of his dominant cultural role, not to dismiss, not to walk away, but instead to focus all his attention and gifts on someone who, in the greater scheme of 1<sup>st</sup> century things, didn't count.

I like to think that for Jesus, if not for Mark, this woman had a name.

So “what would Jesus do” today? He would, of course, be engaging those who are not part of our dominant culture. He'd be in Ferguson, and Philadelphia, and Charleston; he'd be in homeless shelters, and with abuse victims, and on the steps of the Supreme Court (with both sides); he'd be with the folk at Time Together and Habitat for Humanity, and Good Cheer.

He'd be giving people back their true names: by recognizing their humanity, treating them as family, offering them peace and wholeness, and, perhaps most importantly, seeking to restore them into community.

Isn't that what today's gospel asks of us, too?