

What's In A Name?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, October 25, 2009 Isaiah 43:1-7; Mark 3:13-19

Fido, Rover and Spot aren't just playing dead. They are dead. As dog names, anyway. If you haven't noticed, the names people give their pets have changed. Animals used to have names that told you right away that the person speaking was talking about an animal. In the twenty-first century, however, it is often impossible to know whether someone is referring to a boy or a beagle, a girl or a greyhound. Want evidence? Here is a list of the twelve most popular dog names in the Boston area: Bailey, Bella, Buddy, Charlie, Daisy, Jake, Lily, Lucy, Maggie, Max, Molly and Sam. (By the way, half of those names are also on the list of the top 50 baby names for 2009.)

In his book, *One Nation Under Dog*, published earlier this year, Michael Shaeffer explained that people relate to their pets – especially dogs – quite differently than they once did. Dogs, once companions, guards and perhaps working animals, have become members of the family, sometimes substitutes for the children people never had or those who moved away. In a 2001 survey, 83% of dog owners admitted referring to themselves as their dog's mommy or daddy. No wonder, then, that people names have become such popular pet names.

I imagine the names we give our pets matter less to our pets than they do to us. But it seems having a name does matter for animals. Research on dairy cows actually shows a measurable benefit. A new study out of England, reported in *USA Today*, reveals that affectionate treatment of cattle — including the giving of names to cows — can increase the amount of milk they give. The average cow produces about 2,000 gallons of milk a year, but if you call her by name, she'll give you an extra 68 gallons. Cows with names are happy and productive, while anonymous cattle tend to be stressed and unproductive. Makes sense, doesn't it? And God knows the same applies to us.

The prophet Isaiah drew on the significance of having and hearing our names when he reassured the people of Israel in a time of crisis:

But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

And we heard in Mark's gospel how Jesus used the power of naming to strengthen his bonds with some of the disciples: to Simon he gave the name Peter, and to brothers James and John he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder.

So what's in a name? Quite simply, meaning and power. You might recall that in the beginning of Genesis, Adam's first task is to name the animals. Names give meaning and status to the things named. Names signify relationship. Names provide access. Names are a way to get people's attention.

Nearly all of us have had the following experience, I'm sure. You are out in public when you hear someone call your name. Jim! Immediately you turn to see who it is. You don't recognize them, and it turns out that they were calling someone else who shares your name. But simply the sound of your name, even spoken by an unfamiliar voice, is enough to arrest your attention.

Most of us go by more than one name, and some of our names may be more powerful than others. My wife likes to tell the story of how one day she used her knowledge of that power. It seems I was upstairs and she was downstairs at our house. She wanted something from me, so she called my name, "Jim!" No response. Again she called, "Jim!" No response. Now, she could have just walked up the stairs, but she had a better idea. She changed her voice a little, so it would sound like one of our daughters, and at the same volume as before she said, "Daddy?" "Yes, honey?" I replied. I'm still paying for that. But my point is that our names have power in them, and that those who call us by name have access to that power.

Let's look at it another way. When people want to take away someone's power or to treat them as something less than a person, one of the first things to go is the person's name. Often in its place is a number. Think of prisons. Think of the concentration camps of the last century. Many who survived the concentration camps carried with them a visible reminder for the rest of their lives – their number tattooed on their arm. A number rather than a name means that those who gave you the number

have no real interest in you as a living, breathing human being. You are just a unit of production or consumption, an account payable or an account receivable, something to be kept track of, but not a person. And most of us have and have had many numbers – a social security number, credit card numbers, an employee number – the list could go on. Again and again in the course of modern life, we discover we are just a number. But not to God. Never to God. “But now, this is what the LORD says— . . . Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” To God we are always persons who are known, people with names which God knows. We matter. Not how much we own; not how much we owe; not our address or our employment – we matter, we as persons, as individuals who are precious in God’s sight.

For some, this may seem like no big deal – so what? So God knows my name? God knows everyone’s name. It doesn’t make me special. And in a sense they are right. If you think that in order to be special you have to have more of God’s love and attention than others, then I have news for you – you’re not special.

But that is a very childish way to think of being special. It is like a child who says, “Mommy, you don’t really love me because I’m not the favorite.” The love a parent has for her children is special even when she loves all her children equally, as she should.

So it is with God. God loves us all equally, but loves all of us with greater intensity than that with which we are able to love one another.

As the scripture told us, we are precious in God’s sight.

Instead of being childish when we think about God’s love, we should be childlike. Being childlike means that we remain open, that we allow ourselves to trust, that we avoid cynicism, and we let ourselves be filled with joy by the simple fact that someone knows our names. “Except ye become as a little child,” Jesus said, “you can never enter the kingdom of God.”

When I was just a child growing up in a little congregation in Iowa, there was a song we used to sing in Sunday School and at Vacation Bible School. I’m sure many of you know it, too. But you might not have realized that it is based, in part, on the scripture we read this morning from Isaiah. It goes like this:

“Jesus loves the little children,
All the little children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

Jesus does love the little children, and the not-so-little children, and

the young adults, and the people of middle age and the people of later years. And Jesus knows and cares about each one of us individually. Jesus knows our names. Jesus knows us as persons and cares about us as persons.

So we may face the future with confidence and our troubles without fear. For as the prophet said, when the waters rise and when the fire comes – or when any trouble or trial befalls us – we are not alone. God is with us, the God to whom we are precious, the God who knows our names.

Amen.