

October 19, 2025 – Trinity Episcopal Church - 19th Pentecost

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***So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."
Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel
Genesis 32:27-28a***

***In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying,
'Grant me justice against my opponent.'
Luke 18:3***

If you grew up in a certain time or as part of a particular generation, you likely had adults in your life — parents and teachers and coaches, maybe — who taught you the phrase, *sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you*. This well-worn saying was usually trotted out when a kid ran to an adult after having had some verbal altercation on the playground, crying because those kids over there had called them an awful name. And then came the sing-song-y advice, about sticks and stones, to let it go.

I understand the reasoning behind the saying. Our parents and teachers wanted to toughen us up a bit, help us from being too thin-skinned, knowing that life was probably going to hand us even more difficult stuff as we got older, so we might as well get used to it now. They wanted to teach us resiliency. They didn't want us to fold up and shrivel like a hothouse flower when exposed to the wind and cold and brutalities of unpleasant human interactions. Their advice was well-intentioned, but it was a lie.

Because, the truth is, words can hurt, names can hurt. They can be soul crushing and destructive, even life-altering.

Yes, in one sense, cruel names are just words that disappear as soon as the sound waves that brought them to our ears dissipate. But, ephemeral as they are, they also have the capacity to creep into our souls and psyches and take up residence. These destructive names are, as one writer puts it, “names that exaggerate our inadequacies or herald our failures; names that expose our weaknesses or pay tribute to bad decisions. We wear these names on our backs like a snail does its shell, dragging them with us into each new episode, encounter, or chapter of our lives.”¹

Names not only hurt us in the moment, but they have the power to shape our narrative – those stories we tell ourselves or that others repeat about us. Jacob's whole life's narrative was tied up in his name. A name which means the usurper or supplanter or, more commonly, the cheat.

This “Jacob” is Jacob, twin brother of Esau, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah, with whom God made a covenant that they and their many descendants would always be God’s people and would inherit the whole land.

This is the Jacob who was born grasping the heel of his older twin brother, and who, later, egged on by his mother, exploits his brother's weakness of character and convinces Esau to give up his birthright in exchange for some food.

¹ David Lose, Working Preacher website, 7/24/11

As Isaac lays on his deathbed, old and ill and blind, Jacob, again urged on by his mother, tricks his father into blessing him and not Esau, so that Jacob, the *second* son, becomes the heir to the covenant that God made with Abraham.

This is the Jacob who, fearing that his brother Esau might kill him after having stolen his inheritance, leaves home and makes his way to his uncle Laban's house, to marry Laban's daughters and to make his living. In Laban, he finds someone equally deceitful and scheming, and the two men spend years crossing and double-crossing one another over wives and livestock, until Jacob flees again, taking with him all that he can: family and servants, household possessions, and flocks of sheep and goats, oxen and camels.

After fending off Laban from one direction, Jacob learns that his estranged brother, Esau, is coming to him from the other way, accompanied by an army of 400 men. This is where we enter the story today.

Jacob and his family arrive at the Jabbok river, a literal and metaphorical threshold between trouble ahead and trouble behind. He sends his family and property and livestock, everything he has, across the river, toward Esau. Perhaps Jacob is hoping that Esau won't take out his anger on Jacob's household without Jacob there; or maybe Esau will just take possession of anything of value, trying to make up for the inheritance he'd lost out on.

Whatever his reasons – strategy or fear – Jacob stays at the river, the threshold. Stuck in the narrow place between his failures and his bad decisions. Jacob the supplanter, Jacob the cheat, coming face-to-face with the consequences of his name.

In Luke's gospel, we meet the nameless widow. Although she isn't given a proper name, "widow" is the name by which she's known. "Widow" tells the world her whole story, and here's what that name meant: "you are powerless" and "be grateful for what little you have." Something in the widow, though, fights against her name and its narrative. She's seeking justice, even though her name tells her not to.

She knows she's supposed to settle, to be satisfied with crumbs and gleanings, but she knows herself by another name, another narrative, another truth. She is Persistence, she is Striving, she is One Who Claims Dignity which is a gift that God grants to all God's creation. Even if the unjust judge and the rest of the world drag their collective feet in learning the power of her real name, that doesn't keep the widow from trying, again and again.

Too bad Jacob can't seem to break out of the story of his name. Too bad Jacob doesn't have the widow's persistence or the widow's faith or daring, able to lay claim to the truth that God's promises apply to him as well as anyone else. Jacob doesn't have to scheme and cheat to get what is his due; God has provided him with all that he needs. Yet his name and his past have such a tight grip on him, he knows no other way to be.

So, God comes to Jacob in the form of a stranger, and wrestles with him throughout the night. It appears to be wrestling without clear purpose or motive, other than to engage Jacob in a struggle. Jacob, who so often has taken the path of least resistance, relying on cunning or exploiting another's weakness, is now pressed into calling on his own strengths.

Toward the end of the struggle, the mysterious stranger, the manifestation of God, asks Jacob his name – not in order to gain information, but as a sort of confession of identity. The name “Jacob” is the snail's shell he's carried on his back all his life, but God gives him a new name, Israel, which means “triumphant with God” or “he who prevails with God.”

God, who has been with Jacob all along, is now present in his name – a name which will let Jacob-turned-Israel write a new narrative for his life.

This idea of names informing narratives — the stories we tell or are told about us — this notion is not just an ancient, biblical thing, nor is it simply a childhood/playground thing, where names are born of scuffles and misunderstandings. In our current social and political environment, how names are being used is dehumanizing and strategic: instruments of fear meant to stir up suspicion, and separate individuals one from another, reinforcing tribalism and an atmosphere where it's “us” against the “other.”

Words like diversity, equity, and inclusion, which once were names for a process of moving towards equality and justice for groups of folks regularly disenfranchised have now been weaponized as sneering code

words, insinuating synonyms for “unfairly hired” or “inherently less qualified.”

Immigrants and refugees in the U.S. without full documentation are labeled “illegals” — a name employed to help our minds make the leap from thinking of people in various stages of a long and complex administrative process to the idea of lawlessness, chaos, and crime.

Words like “woke” (once a slang term for consciousness of injustice) and empathy (the ability to “feel with” the experiences and concerns of another human being) these are instead being hurled as epithets.

These words, these names, aim to tell, to perpetuate, a story about who belongs and who doesn’t; who has power and who doesn’t; who counts and who does not.

Sadly, the church, too, has its own history of horrible names, at various times having called queer people an ‘abomination’, and ‘the downfall of Western civilization’. Called those of other faith traditions ‘damned’ and ‘unredeemed’. Called women seeking ordination to religious leadership ‘perversions’. Called people with doubts and questions ‘faithless’ and ‘heretical’. Called divorced people ‘unworthy’ of receiving the sacraments. Called those who reject the oppressive forces of the dominant culture — things like patriarchy, misogyny, trans and homophobia — called people who reject such ideas ‘evil’ and ‘the anti-Christ’.

To be clear, this name-calling was not — is not — of God. It is a sign that the church — the human institution — is as vulnerable to the same flaws, temptations, and brokenness as the culture in which it exists, and has to continually work to re-center itself on the God of love, justice, and inclusion

If someone, whether the church or the wider world, has imposed on you a name that you no longer want (or *never* wanted) to claim, then take your cue from the nameless widow. Do her names — Persistence, Striving, She Who Claims Dignity — do her names better tell your story, who you are? Or, listen to the names that God gives to God's creation, names like "Beloved" "Enough" "Whole" and "Strong." What if we took, as our own, names like "Embodiment Of Love" and "Bearer Of Grace"? How might the stories we tell about each other or about ourselves transform how we live and move and have our being in this world, if we called ourselves and each other names of kindness, respect, and worth?

There's almost never a week that goes by where I don't run across yet another fretful article about the death of religion in America, how perhaps we are living in a post-Christian era, too evolved and sophisticated or advanced to need sacraments or sacred story, faith communities or God. Or, articles about how we have devolved into nationalism, only masquerading as Christianity. Since many of my friends are clergy, both in and outside of the Episcopal church, these kinds of hand-wringing news items circulate often and quickly.

It struck me – in light of today's scripture passages about people giving in or fighting against the narrative of their names – that the organizational church has more often allowed itself to get sucked into the powerless fatalism of Jacob than it has endeavored to emulate the faithfulness of the justice-seeking persistent widow. In its 2000 year history, the Christian church has been called names like “irrelevant,” “dying,” or “failing” so many times that we've taken to wearing those names on our backs, like the snail wears its shell, and carried those names into every new era, every new challenge, letting the names drive our narrative.

And yet, everywhere I look across what is purported to be a desolate landscape, I find, in the words of C.S. Lewis, *patches of thaw*. Evidence of the presence of God working in and through us, reminding us of our need for God and for each other, as well as structures and rituals that allow us to honor and serve those things in a meaning-filled way.

There is a fundamental need, a human hunger, to find a source for alternative narratives, more hopeful than most of those that humanity crafts for itself, left to its own devices. A way to stand counter to the hurtful names that pursue us or that we whisper to ourselves, based on our fears and failures, inadequacies and insecurities. In our souls, we long for names like Redemption and Grace, Forgiveness and Freedom from Fear, and we need a word of encouragement and a dose of perseverance from the God whose power is so much greater than ours, so as not to lose heart or hope as we struggle to take hold of those blessed names. *Amen.*