

Name Calling
Second Sunday After Epiphany
Season of Reconciliation
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday Observance
January 17, 2016
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Isaiah 62

Let's talk about names. I don't particularly like my name: Gordon; Gordon Stuart; Gordon Stuart Wiersma – it's just not what I would call a grand or poetic or compelling name. I'm not looking for sympathy or affirmation – I'm fine, I've made my peace with my name – I just know I would never have considered a Gordon Stuart junior! How are you with your name? – are you named after, named for, family name, alliterative name? (Kevin, Kim, Kyle, Kelly, Kory Rosenau!) Somebody gave your name to you, which is interesting – you COULD change it, but very few do; you were given your name – it's what you got – it's who you are! If you are a parent then you get to GIVE a name, which is interesting – naming someone. “What's your name?” – it's a foundational way that we know one another. And then there's what people do WITH names: for me it was always ‘WIERDsma’ – clever, right? in case you hadn't thought of that, now there you go! In my Doctor of Ministry class a week past, one of my colleagues introduced herself this way: ‘ny name is LaSonya Michelle; growing up kids always called me ‘Lasagne’ for La Sonya, so I go by Michelle’ – Michelle was terrific, but don't call her LaSonya! Names make a difference to us.

Which makes a turn from names to name calling. We've all had it done to us; we've all done it – playing with, teasing about, being cruel with names – it's a thread that connects all generations. And whether or not you had a name ripe for such name calling or not, there is too the kind of name calling that happens regardless of your given name – the labels, the digs, the blessings, the curses, the stereotypes, with which a person or people can be painted. There can be a more pleasant side: the nice one, the smart one, the pretty one, the good one...although those carry their own baggage with them. But more often name calling is meant to tear town: kids know the cruelty of labeling the stupid one or the fat one or the nerdy one or the awkward one. And the name calling of race and religion and culture is something that grownups have

their own affinity for, spanning from the seemingly innocent to the insidious. So many names we have for one another: conservative, liberal, republican, democrat, citizen, immigrant, illegal, convict; black, white, Hispanic, Asian, middle-eastern; straight, gay, bisexual; Christian, Muslim, Jew, atheist – but now brace yourself: we also use the names nigger, spic, honky, chink, spook; faggot; kike, towelhead, fundie. No need to go further - there are entire databases dedicated to the documentation of racial and religious and ethnic slurs over the ages; the capacity of human name calling is stunning. And whether it is an inflammatory name or not, we use the labels to identify – to organize – to divide – to designate – to denigrate - to determine...who someone IS; I name you; you name me – asserting the power to tell you, me, others, who they ARE!

Let's talk about names in Isaiah 62 – it's what it's all about: 'you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD shall give.' God says 'you've been called some names: called Forsaken; called Desolate – but that is not your true name. I name you: My Delight; I call you: Married – that is your name.' At this crucial juncture in Israel's story the word from the LORD is about names. Names are always important in Scripture, especially when a name is changed - Abram & Sarai to Abraham & Sarah; Jacob to Israel; Saul to Paul – it's a way of expressing that identity has been claimed, named, by God in a transforming way. Now, the word of God to Israel has many names of judgment and justice in it too, but it remains at the heart that this is the true name God speaks for this people: 'My Delight – Married'; they are names that express abiding love, that express a covenant relationship of wholeness and security.

It seems to me I hear a lot of name calling in our world today – a lot of names thrown from one person at another, from one group at another, from one religion at another (one church at another), from one nation at another. Names thrown as weapons - that seek to claim who or what someone is in a way that denigrates and divides, designates and determine. So, with all that name calling going on, I figure if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! Let's do some name calling of our own...but what if we do it in a way that puts name & calling together? Names ARE important; so what if we say that 'name calling' has to do with names that embody our calling

from God? And what if we start name calling with this rule: the only names that count are from God? God is the Creator and ultimately only God names and claims God's creation as it truly is.

So let's start the name calling with ourselves. How do you speak of, think of, name yourself? There are many names we have for ourselves - some too lofty I'm sure, but some diminishing ones too - some that write yourself off. How do you speak of, think of, name yourself? But then what is God's name for you? Isaiah 62: God says 'My Delight' is your name - it is powerful to be found delightful - think about it, feel it. (you can't disagree with God!) I Corinthians 12 - it says 'Gifted' is your name - you are gifted to build up and serve others. God's Gifted Delight - that's your name! So here's what I believe - the names you believe for yourself are the names you will see for others too: for each of us to be renewed and renamed by our Creator with these names - Delight - Gifted - child of God - receiving those names opens us to see God claiming those around us with those same names.

And I want to be clear that this is not simply some kind of feel-good self-esteem booster that is used to push aside difficulties or to avoid justice and truth-telling. No, it is the word from our Creator that as we face the brokenness of our lives and our world, of violence and suffering, of division and conflict, that as we do so there are certain names we will not use: names like Enemy; names like Other; names like Expendable. At a farm in Palestine called the Tent of Nations where a family is seeking justice as the government tries to take their land, the family has a slogan: 'We refuse to be enemies'. You see, there are certain names God did not create. So at the crux of our calling is the kind of name calling we do - the kind of name calling that comes from our Creator.

Isn't it kind of joyful subversion to think about 'Christian name calling'? - a name calling that goes like this: God delights in you (in me, in you) and in this world and God is married to it - God will not leave you or us or this world alone - that's our shared name. Dr. King had a way of expressing this name calling that God speaks to us: Beloved Community - that's what Dr. King called it - that's the name for the way God made us to live. Now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was all too familiar with name calling - he was called names: trouble-maker,

communist, traitor, nigger, heretic, radical, enemy – that’s just a start and those aren’t the worst. But Martin knew his true name: Beloved, Beloved of God...Dr. King knew his true name from God no matter the circumstance, no matter the struggle, the sorrow, the uncertainty; no matter if he felt Forsaken and Desolate; he was held by a true name: My Delight, Beloved - because that name was from God, sealed to him in his Living Savior Jesus; he knew that name belonged to him, WAS him...which allowed him to see it was the name God gave for others too: Beloved. Dr. King REFUSED to see others as Enemy because he knew they were children of God in whom God delighted. Dr. King refused to accept division as inevitable, because he knew that God’s word of shalom, of true peace, is God’s calling for all people – the Beloved Community.

Which leads me to simply say this day that we are to carry with us the name calling of our Creator:

What’s your name? – God’s Delight; Gifted; God’s Beloved – it’s who you are.

What’s our name? – God’s Beloved Community – called to build up and serve.

Who is around you? – people with the same name as you: God’s Delight and Beloved too.

What is this world? – the place for Beloved Community – God created this world for Shalom and the Spirit of Christ is creating Beloved Community.

Those are the names from God that cannot be taken from us – that we are given to share with others: so, let the name calling begin.

AMEN.