

I love a good bookstore. One of my favorites is a Barnes and Noble in Raleigh. I have a routine that typically follow when I visit that store. I head straight to the religion section, scour the shelves to see if there is anything new. After a little browsing, I move to art and architecture, and by the end of the day, I'd be in their music section. On one particular trip my attention was diverted to a book they had on display. I don't remember the exact title of the book, but it involved popular names for children, their origins, and their meaning. Most parents know that their choice of a name could mean a great deal to their child.

All of us have friends who are hard to imagine with some other name. Take (Congregation name) for instance, she looks like a (Name). The same could be said for...(Name a few in the congregation. It's like someone saw you, got to know you, and then said, yep, you should be called, (Name). Of course, that's hardly the way it is with names. You receive a name, and then you grow into it. Maybe Katherine is Katherine because that was the name she was given and, over time, she became as she was called.

I think that's the way it was with Grace. Grace lives out in Wyoming. One day we were talking about our growing up days. To hear her tell it, Grace was a holy terror. She was a busy girl and into everything. But over time, this wild child called Grace became a gracious woman named Grace.

Rarely do we pick our names for ourselves. More often than not, our name picks us. Our parents give us our name, but others will bestow names upon us as well, and there are times that these names, these nicknames, are not what we would have chosen for ourselves.

When I was in college, everyone had a nickname. Doofus, jock, the beast. Sometimes the names that we gave others were given in jest, names that reflected a quality in a person that we admired. One fellow, whose real name I cannot remember, was nicknamed Plato. Plato was an interesting guy, hardly a day went by that he didn't ponder or question the greater meaning of what he did the weekend before.



Sadly, there were also names given that were not so generous, names like Fatso, Peewee, or Metal Mouth. Sometimes a person's nickname represented our cruelty toward others, not our charity.

I had lunch the other day with a good friend. I don't normally get desert but found a way to convince myself that I needed a piece of apple pie with ice cream. My friend chose not to join me in desert. Wanting to make myself feel better and in front of the waitress, I urged him to join me in eating some forbidden calories. You ate a bunch of rabbit food for lunch, I said, why not enjoy at least part of your meal, your far from being heavy.

He replied, but I used to be. Really, that must have been a long time ago. When I was a kid, my friends used to call me tubs. I had that name through college. I hated it. I would smile on the outside but inside, I was dying. I swore to myself that one day, no one would call me that.

You can almost feel his pain; maybe you know that pain firsthand. It is the pain of a name that hurts, traps, confines a person. It is a name that cuts straight to the heart.

In our gospel this morning, we hear a story about a woman. According to Luke, she is known in her community as the bent woman. How would you like to be known for all time as the bent man or woman? She was bent over; she had been for quite some time. Constantly staring at the ground, her back contorted. She is known only as the bent woman. When they saw her hobbling down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, they didn't say, "Here comes Louise", or "Look, it's Elizabeth." What they said was, "Here comes the bent woman, the cripple."

That was her name, and in her name was her life, her destiny, her fate. Today we no longer designate a person in such a cruel way. We no longer say that she is crippled, or he's nothing but a deaf mute.

My brother's daughter, at the ripe old age of two weeks suffered a stroke. She has trouble with her sight, her thought process. She suffers from cerebral palsy. At her school, they say that Ginna is an exceptional child; she is a young lady with disabilities; she's a person with special needs. I have no doubt that this is societies attempt to keep the masses from trying to pigeonhole or label Ginna, and countless others like her.

The woman in our passage doesn't have a name, other than the name given to her by the town. She is known by others on a name given to her based on her disability. Her only identity is that of a victim.

According to St. Luke, she has no family; no occupation; she is known only by her deformity. She's the one bent over, she bears the weight upon her shoulder of an invisible, yet heavy burden, the burden of being different, of not looking like everyone else. She is known only as the bent woman. I believe St. Luke includes her for all those who are so named. He's a drunk, she's stupid, they are as



blind as a bat, he's uglier than a mud fence, she is one obese woman.

She is the bent woman who has an encounter with Jesus. Jesus heals her. For the first time in her adult life, she is able to stand up straight. After looking at the ground for eighteen years, she is able to hold her head high and look forward. She is restored to what most of us call normal.

But there's more. Much more. Did you hear how Jesus addressed her? Did you catch what Jesus said about her? He does not call her disabled woman nor does he say that she is a person with special needs. Jesus seems to have no need in making her a professional victim. Her life was not defined by her disability.

Jesus called her a daughter of Abraham and I believe that to be important. The one we address; the one our Bible calls the bent woman is at least in the eyes of Jesus, a daughter of Abraham.

So what exactly does that mean? Who was Abraham? Abraham was the great great granddaddy of Israel. According to the Book of Genesis, on a stary night, in a land far away, Abraham entered into a promise with God. You remember, God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham. A nation by which all nations would be blessed.

This woman is a daughter of Abraham; she is an heir to the blessings of God. On top of that, as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the world. She is meant for more than cruel labeling. She, bent over as she was, was and is an important part of God's great salvation for this world.

Even if she had not been physically healed by Jesus, she stands up straight. Her life is now caught up in God's promise to the world. Her life has been renamed, no longer is she included in our human story of injustice or sadness. She is now part of God's drama of redemption. Let us therefore remember from this day forward, not to think of her as the bent woman, or as a victim of society's cruelty. Let us remember her as a daughter of Abraham.

Jesus means to name each and every one of you as well. The Living God, our Creator, will not allow us to live into the names our world wants to give us. You and I, we are sons and daughters of Abraham. Our lives are meant to count for something, we are invited to take our place on the stage of God's redeeming work in this world.

Therefore in this church, when we baptize a young child or an adult, we ask what name has been given to this person. Though your parents gave you the name, Ed, or Susan, or David, the church now gives you a new name. A name that reveals to the world who you really are; that name is Christian.

Being part of the Body of Christ, we promise the newly baptized that we will help them grow into their new name, that we will do all we can to see that they embrace their new name, that we will help them live into God's gracious dream for all of humanity.

You are all sons and daughters of Abraham. Whatever else the world may call you, you are a Christian. So, stand up straight, act like it, and go out into the world in peace. Amen.