

Living into the “Fullness” of Who We are

Acts 11: 19-26; I Peter 2: 9-11; Ephesians 3: 14-21.

Living into the “Fullness” of who we are.

Labour day weekend! A return to routine! Perhaps also a weekend to reflect on how our summer theme of “fullness” will work itself as we move into a full fall schedule.

I have entitled the sermon, “Living into the fullness of who we are.” Into our identity as Christians and as followers of Jesus. Into the name we have been given as God’s beloved.

Christina did a great introduction to my sermon a few weeks ago when she talked about the significance of names and name changes. I don’t want to repeat that (you can look that up on TUMC’s website if you missed it, or don’t remember it!!!) Instead I want to read excerpts from a poem that speaks about the various ways that names effect who we are and who we become. This poem is the only one I have ever written, you will be glad to know. But it has formed a theme in all of my theological and ministry work. I think you will recognize most of the biblical allusions that are included—it will be a short-hand review of some of the ways that names and identities are important in the Scriptures.

A Time for Naming and a Time for Being Named¹

¹ A version of this poem was first published in *Courier* (Spring, 1990)

Being a Christian community is all about naming
Exploring the names given, the names accepted.
Identifying the relationships and the ruptures
The dreams and the visions
Around us and beyond us.
Reconsidering old names, creating new ones,
Seeking correlations, discovering connections
Encountering the Mystery of the One who first named us.

Names are powerful! Naming is risky!

Names give concreteness to our concepts,

They bring order to a chaotic world.

Names can hurt and names can heal,

Names do something to both the one who names
and the ones being named.

Names witness to who we are
and to who we can become.

Names characterize and categorize.

Names identify and label.

You shall be called by a new name (Is. 62:2).

But he was called a blasphemer, a traitor. . .

They were called Protestants

They were called Catholics

They were called Mennonites

They were called Muslims

They were called the quiet in the land

They were called troublemakers

They were called peacemakers

They were called . . .

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed. (1 Peter 4:14).

Names divide or unify.

Names include or exclude.

I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos,

I belong to Cephas (I Cor. 1: 12)

Let us make a name for ourselves . . . (Gen. 11:4).

By what name shall we be called?

With which name shall we identify?

Rich or poor? Powerful or powerless?

Oppressed or oppressor? Educated or illiterate?

Disabled or talented? First world or third world?

East or West, North or South? Young or old?

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free,

there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

Names express who we are.

Names hide who we are.

You have a name of being alive but you are dead (Rev. 3: 1).

You are Simon son of John?

You are to be called Cephas, (which is translated Peter) (John 1:42).

By what name shall I address you?

Can I really tell you who I am?

Can I share the depth of my experience?

Shall I make myself vulnerable?

Can I get to know you? Do you really want to know me?

Names recognize and give dignity.

Names can be changed.

The shepherd calls his own sheep by name (John 10:3).

The nameless ones are named.

You are a son of Abraham

You are a daughter of Sarah.

The forgotten ones are remembered,

The lost are found.

Hagar ... where have you come from and where are you going?

Zacchaeus ... I'm coming to your house today!

Mary ... why are you weeping?

Once you were not a people but now you are God's people (1 Peter 2: 10).

How then shall we name the God we meet

In the scriptures and in our experience

In our relationships and in the tradition?

The God beyond all naming

The God of Mystery and Incarnation

The God of Sara and Hagar and Abraham
The God of Mary and Joseph and the women at the tomb
The God who enters our world again and again.

Naming God in worship is a risky endeavor
In the midst of idols, masks, false images and pretenses
Listening to the God who first named us
Hearing our names, remembering our calling,
Seeing visions, dreaming possibilities
Observing the world with new eyes.

Naming God, and each other can be
A response to a name given, a blessing understood.
But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation
God's own people,
in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of
of the One who called you out of darkness into the marvelous light. (I Peter
2:9)

As a teenager my mother often said to me just as I headed out the door,
“Remember whose child you are.” At first, I did not understand what she
meant. I thought it was a warning: “Remember, you are a PK, pastor's kid,
don't make your parents ashamed of you.” But as I grew older, I realized
that what my mother wanted me to remember was that I was a child of God,
not merely a child of the Neufeld family. She wanted me to understand that
I had a gift that went with me wherever I would go, into whatever situation I
might find myself. This gift was a strong inner knowledge that I was a

beloved daughter of God. It was a gift of identity, given to me by God, that could be claimed by me. She knew that this identity would keep me on the right track as I made life choices. My mother wanted me to live with this assurance in faith and freedom, knowing my own name as Christian and beloved child of God and knowing the name of the God I worshipped.

However, this assurance did not come easily as I entered the larger world of work. I remember well a time when I was very uneasy about my identity as a Christian in the workplace. I was new in the elementary school where I had just received my first paying job as a grade 3 teacher. I had graduated from a Christian high school where the emphasis was on testifying to so-called “unbelievers” about my faith. This contributed to a sense of guilt rather than freedom--guilt because I was very unsure about my faith, let alone how to share it and often remained silent when talking to people not from my own faith background. As a 20-year old who had been sheltered in my home church and home community, I was also very unsure of my identity as a teacher. Despite a year at Teacher’s college, I had not learned how to integrate well with others in the college community, always feeling a bit separate, not sure how to be both Christian and open to others, how to be a Christian and also a good teacher.

Near the beginning of the school year one of the teachers who had known me from high school approached me and told me that the “Christian” teachers ate their lunch in a room by themselves and he invited me to join the group. Until then I had been enjoying getting to know the other teachers in the staff room, but now I wasn’t sure what to do. Should I identify with the “Christian” teachers or with the regular staff, some of whom I already

knew also attended church—though not one of the so called “evangelical” churches. I struggled all year, sometimes eating with the set-apart Christian group, sometimes with the regular staff—always feeling outside and never being able to honestly share with anyone who I really was.

That experience left me with many questions: Who was I really? How did my identity as a Jesus follower shape my interactions with other staff? What should I say and do when I did not agree with other Christians and their way of witnessing to Jesus? How could I live out my identity as Christian in an environment that had drawn boundaries between people-- boundaries that I did not really agree with?

The early Christians at Antioch also had trouble figuring out their identity and the boundaries between them and other people. The church in Antioch was founded by Jewish believers who had been scattered because of the persecution in Jerusalem that happened very soon after Pentecost. Some of these people were Greek speaking and they had begun breaking down religious and ethnic barriers, speaking to ethnic Greeks as well as Jews of their new-found faith in Jesus. Probably many of these Greeks were God-fearers, that is people who had already begun attending synagogue (though not becoming Jews) because they were attracted to the One God whom Jews worshipped. What had happened in a small way in the house of Cornelius, a story told in the previous chapter in Acts, began to become a movement here in the city of Antioch. Greek and Jewish believers were becoming one people under the name of Christ.

The context for this unusual grouping of people was Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman empire, with a population of half a million, a very cosmopolitan city that included many Jews. It was the seat of the Roman provincial administration of Syria and included a harbor on the Mediterranean that was the centre of travel and trade between the east and the west. We are told that it was in this cosmopolitan city that the followers of Jesus were first named Christian.

In the Bible reading for today, I have usually read this last sentence almost as if it is a footnote—or an after thought. Most of the story is about how the group was formed and how Barnabas and Paul became its first leaders and teachers. However, I wonder if the last sentence is not the climax of the story. It seems that the surrounding community had begun to take note that God's hand was among these people. People were becoming aware that something unforeseen was happening right before their eyes. For the first time, a truly Jewish/Gentile faith community was being formed. This was very attractive to some of the people in Antioch. They rejoiced when they saw that the boundaries between people were being broken down. They noticed that the Jewish faith was becoming open to those long excluded from that religious community. And they were truly surprised when they saw how those of non-Jewish faith were being fully included. It seemed time for a new name, a name that identified this new community with Christ, with the anointed one of God. It may be that the name "Christian" was first coined by someone attracted to the faith because of this miracle of community.

However, the name may also have arisen just to distinguish the Jewish/Greek disciples from other Jews. The suffix –“ianos” often means “party of” so that Christianos could mean the Christ party, those who identify with the Messiah Christ and base their faith on him. Such a name could be a factual statement or one of reproach.

In this sense the name also became part of what divided people from each other in some parts of the early church. The letter to the Corinthians somewhat later suggests that there were people who said that were followers of Paul or of Apollos or of Cephas or of Christ. Paul chides them for these divisions because it divided people from one another, creating competition and dissension instead of unity. In fact, the story in Acts about the church in Antioch is told, partly to help explain the need for a Jerusalem council where a decision needed to be made as to who was welcome in this Christian community. For there were people who were not happy with the presence of non-Jews—they were insisting that everyone first of all needed to become a Jew, that is become circumcised, before being allowed into the community. Thus the name was very controversial within the early community of disciples.

In addition, it became very dangerous to call oneself Christian in the Roman empire where Caesar was Lord. We were reminded of this throughout a tour we took a number of years ago in Turkey, Greece and Rome. In Turkey we saw the so called “underground cities” where Christians used the tunnels so that they could hide when persecuted. In Greece we saw the stadium where 40,000 people could be seated, the place where a revolt broke out incited by silver smiths who were out of work when idols were replaced by worship of

God through Jesus. And in Rome we saw the Coliseum where Christians were killed by lions or gladiators. To claim the name Christian was not just controversial; it was very risky to do so in that context.

I wonder if those early Christians ever asked a question that we often ask: Why name ourselves Christian at all? Why not be “anonymous” Christians, quietly living out our faith, but never openly identifying with the Christian community? How important is a name anyway? Why not just attend church when convenient and never be baptized or openly confess Jesus as Lord? Would that not appeal more to others? Would that not break down boundaries and include everyone? Would we not more easily convince others with our actions rather than words?

This is a real question for us as we enter the workplace, as we live our daily lives in a world that is already fraught with divisions, with enmity, with lack of community and with overt wars and violence. How important is it to be named Christian in this context?

I have learned much through my interactions with those of other faiths. I was the director of the Mennonite Centre at the Toronto School of Theology when we were asked by MCC to host some Muslim students from Iran. Since hospitality is so basic to being Christian, we very readily committed ourselves to supporting two students and their families through their years of study. However, I was unsure what this meant for us in terms of our conversations in theology. After all they were Muslim and we were Christian. Our countries saw each other as enemies. I am very grateful for the encouragement of MCC personnel who suggested that our mandate was

to share as deeply as we could of our Christian faith and to listen as deeply as we could to Muslims as they shared their faith with us. They suggested that we begin in trust and humility and vulnerability to build relationships. It was in this interaction, each of us sharing out of our deepest identity, that community and friendship was formed. Barriers of misunderstanding were broken down, faith was deeply shared, forgiveness was granted. We even learned to say “amen” to each other’s prayers and to worship the one God together.

Our interaction with indigenous spirituality also could only happen when I claimed my own identity as a Christian and let others name their own spiritual home. Our son in law comes from a First Nations community near Massey in Northern Ontario. That so called “reserve” has suffered much from the colonialism of Christians and their residential schools. They are only now attempting to reclaim the spiritual heritage of their forbears.

There is much pain connected with the church and its actions and many reject the particular church that stands in the midst of their community. Many of these indigenous people are returning to the prayers of their grandfathers and grandmothers. They have sweat lodges in which prayer and cleansing takes place, they have ceremonies in which they thank the Creator for generous gifts, they seek to follow the knowledge that the Great Spirit has given them to guide their interactions with others.

Fred’s family is very aware that we name ourselves Christian, though we know that now is the time to keep silent and listen rather than preach our own message. They have talked to us about their experience with the church

and its colonialism and their own renewed faith in the Creator. We have acknowledged our own complicity in the way Canada and the Christian church has tried to assimilate the aboriginal people, denying them their own choices, and how this has often been done in a very violent way.

In an amazing way, they have welcomed us into their circle. We have participated in a sweat lodge and were surprised by how much it resembled a good old-fashioned prayer meeting. The wedding of our daughter included a Christian ceremony on one day and some months later a ceremony led by an elder on First nations land. Both ceremonies were attended by the aboriginal and the Mennonite family circles. Again, we were surprised at how much the promises were similar, done in the presence of the Creator. As we continue to learn from each other, we are led to praise of the Creator God who is breaking down barriers and creating new community among us despite the failures of the church. And we are thankful for Jesus who has shown us the way to participate in this peace-making while holding firmly to our identity as people of God through Jesus Christ.

These experiences have taught me that as Christians we can participate in God's work of breaking down barriers and building community among people. But we can do this only if we become deeply aware of the love and mercy of God who has received us into the family of God and given us a name, and identity that we can claim.

Of course, claiming a name, often means rejecting an old name, given by others, one that is often deeply embedded in our innermost selves. Often this means a deliberate choice must be made.

I smile as I remember the first time I learned this lesson. I grew up with the name “Careless” associated with much that I did, In school, I could never write neatly, staying on the lines provided. “Careless” came up rather frequently in my report cards. My colouring books looked dismal with red, blue and yellow spreading way beyond the outline given. Even now when I am cooking my kitchen looks like a disaster area, which luckily my husband Gary cannot stand, so he usually is the one to clean up after me. Both at home and at school I was told I was just so careless and if I only tried harder to be neat I could perhaps accomplish something good. I had internalized that name (given to me by others) and often felt insecure about my own gifts.

But something has changed within me and I have grown into claiming another name. I date this change back to a very simple experience I had as a counselor at Silver Lake one summer in my youth. One activity that we engaged in was making hats from natural material around us. You can imagine that mine was quite a sight to behold. But it was praised for its creativity! I remember that moment when I suddenly experienced a shift within me from *careless* to *creative*. I realized that the same personality traits produced both names. But to claim the new Name, to live into its potential I had to let go, relinquish the old Name and claim this new name for myself. Now, I freely change recipes to make the dinner better, I write over and beyond the lines, with freedom knowing that my own creativity is unique and I do not need to be like someone else.

Peter knew that giving up the name, Simon, was not easy and claiming the new one, Peter, the Rock, was not done without some vulnerability, struggle

and pain. So too in I Peter, the letter writer urges the community to give up the name of “no people” and claim the name of God’s people, give up the name of being an alien and exile and claim the names of being a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Accepting the name given to us at our birth, a beloved child of God, is a beginning. Claiming the name of follower of Jesus is another step. Living into the fullness of what that means is yet something else. The letter to the Ephesians gives us some suggestions as to what this might mean. Note, however, he does this in a form of a prayer rather than in the form of instruction, because living into the fullness of who we are meant to be is a gift that must be received again and again. (Take out your bulletin and follow along).

The prayer begins with an assumption that every family receives its name from God, its name as beloved. It is not an exclusive prayer! Then the prayer continues moving to a direct prayer for this particular community in Ephesus, the beloved community. The imagery that follows is expansive, praying that this beloved community will grow into the fullness of God, into the fullness of abundant life. I love the imagery that begins with the inner being and moves out from that into the breadth of all reality and finally ends with the fullness of God.

Firstly, the writer prays that the community will be renewed at the core of their being with power and love through the Spirit as they are rooted and grounded in love. Empowerment and the ability to love is what we receive when we fully accept our identity, our name, as “beloved”.

Secondly, the prayer continues praying that the community will grasp and know reality in all its dimensions, in its fullness (the width, the length, the height, the depth). Again, this knowledge comes gradually as we open ourselves to newness and to change and to others—including our openness to knowing Christ's love—something that goes beyond our usual definitions of knowledge.

And finally, the prayer reaches its climax—a prayer that the community will experience the fullness of God. This fullness is something that I have trouble defining. I have had moments when I could say that I was experiencing the fullness of joy or the fullness that comes with creativity or the fullness of love in a relationship, but I am not sure what is meant by the fullness of God.; Somehow I think it means that we experience something of the abundance and creativity and generosity and love that is part of the divine—that is the abundant life that we have heard so much about during this summer series.

The prayer ends with a doxology of thanks to the One who can accomplish much more that we can ask or imagine.

There is a reason that this passage in Ephesians is a prayer rather than a command, a prayer for a gift rather than a strong reprimand of what we as Christians are to do. There is also a reason that this is directed to a community, to more than an individual, because it is in community that we grow as we mutually support, encourage and sometimes even admonish each other.

This prayer has been one that I have prayed personally but one that Gary and I have also prayed together as we have celebrated our wedding anniversaries

over the years. TUMC has also had experience with this prayer. It is a prayer that leaders in our congregation prayed at every meeting during that very stressful process of discernment a number of years ago around human sexuality. I believe that we today are beginning to live into the reality that we prayed for during that stressful year.

This is also a prayer that we must continue to pray as a congregation today as we begin a new school year, as we enter into the routines of work, as we relate to others and as we commit ourselves to growing into the fullness of our identity as God's beloved community—a fullness that will very naturally spill over into the communities around us as it expresses itself in loving actions and words.

To conclude this meditation, I invite you to read a paraphrase of this prayer with me, consciously and deliberately praying this prayer for each other in this community and beyond.

Let us pray:

I bow my knees before the Creator, Father, Mother God from whom every family on earth takes its name.

- 1. I pray that according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.***
- 2. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge***

3. So that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

***Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do
accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to
God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations,
forever and ever. Amen.***