

God's Nicknames

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 16:13-18

Tonight's service is called God's nicknames, and I admit that is a strange title. Hopefully a little less strange by the time the night is over, because tonight we will observe one of God's interesting traits. The Bible shows us that God likes to give people nicknames. God likes to take people with perfectly good names and suggest a new name for them. It's something he does all the time, in both testaments. Tonight we're going to reflect on God's nicknames and see what they tell us about the ways of our Lord and what it means to be his children.

Simon and Abram - Genesis 17: 4-8 and Matthew 16:13-18

There's a certain kind of nickname that is almost like an oxymoron. You have an enormous friend, a great hulking man who makes the ground shake when he comes into the room. And what do you and your friends call him? *Tiny*. Or you get a new pet turtle and you name him *Flash*. Or you really want a dog and all your Mom will let you have is a goldfish, so you name the fish *Rover*. People with a sharp sense of irony do these sort of things. Sometimes nicknames remind us of who a person – or turtle or fish – is not. That's probably how Abram saw his new name. The Lord said to him *"No longer shall your name be Abram, now your name shall be Abraham! Your name shall be Father of nations for I will make nations of you!"* At this point Abram is 99 years old. It's been 24 years since the Lord promised a child to him. For 24 years he and Sarai have been waiting on this promised baby with no results. And now the Lord was naming him Father of Nations? What would people think? He could imagine what Sarai would say when he got home and told her. She was already sensitive about being childless. How would she take it when he told her, "Honey, from now on call me Father of Nations"? It wouldn't be pretty.

Abram may have thought the new name was ironic. But the Lord knew better. This is one of the kinds of nicknames God gives out. Sometimes the Lord gives people a nickname based not on how they appear to the rest of the world today, instead God gives them a name based on how he sees them; how he knows they will be in the fullness of his plan. Abram's nickname might have seemed ironic on the day he got it, but a little over a year later the irony dimmed on that miraculous day when Isaac was born. On that day it probably wasn't so hard for Sarah to call Abraham by his new name.

This is the same kind of nickname that Peter got from Jesus. From now on you shall be called Peter – Rock – because on this rock I will build my church. Peter gets a name that suggests unshakeable resolve. Peter gets a name that suggests a man who will stand firm in the

midst of life's storms. Of course we know that in the very next storm he faces, Peter doesn't stand like a rock in the storm, he runs like a rabbit. It's only later, after multiple moments of failure and brokenness that the rabbit becomes a rock. Later Peter leads the church, and preaches boldly and sacrifices his own life for the sake of his Lord. Peter has to grow into his name. Jesus names Peter not as he is right now, but as he will be someday.

There is something exciting about God looking at people that way, naming us according to who we could be, naming us according to who we will be, not according to what we are. There's a story told about Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore. After the sculpture was complete, Mr. Borglum was asked how he did it, how he managed to make Roosevelt, Lincoln Jefferson and Washington on the side of the mountain. "Well, said Borglum, "Those figures were always there in the granite; all I had to do was dynamite 40,000 tons of rock away to bring them into view."

That's more or less the story of Abraham and Peter and the rest of us too. God sees us not as we are, or not simply as we are – he sees the real us, the Holy us, the new creation us underneath all the crud, underneath all the masquerades and the pretentions. God means to bring that new creation self, our real self out into the open even if that takes a whole lot of painful carving and hammering, even if it takes 40,000 tons of dynamite, even if it takes a cross. God doesn't just see us as we are. He sees us as we will be someday. That's why he calls Abram, Abraham. That's why he calls Cephas, Peter. And maybe that's why he calls people like you and me saints.

James and John – Matthew 16:13-18

The Sons of Thunder. That's a great nickname isn't it? It sounds like a name you'd give to a tag team wrestling duo, or maybe a biker gang, or a 70's heavy metal band. Why did Jesus call the Zebedee boys the Sons of Thunder? This nickname isn't as easy to figure out as Abraham. I have an idea though. I think that the name had to do with their passionate personalities. Their fire. Their ambition. You get the sense that the Zebedee boys were an assertive twosome.

For example there was the incident in Samaria. Jesus and his disciples are walking through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, and the Samaritan villages refuse to give them hospitality. The Sons of Thunder are outraged and they say, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" They're trying to add a little 'Kaboom' to Christ's ministry. That incident certainly fits their nickname. Or then there's the story in Mark 10. James and John's mother – Mrs. Thunder - comes to Jesus and requests that her sons be given the two highest posts in the Kingdom. Mom asks that James and John be seated on the right and the left of King Jesus. That takes chutzpah. That reflects ambition. Maybe when Jesus called them Sons of Thunder, he wasn't thinking about Dad. And then there's the way they rise

to leadership among the disciples. Along with Peter, James and John compose Jesus' inner circle, his closest aids. The Zebedee boys were not quiet, work in the background types. They were the Sons of Thunder.

Here's a case where the nickname that Jesus gives is affectionate and fitting, but also carries with it a gentle challenge. In this nickname, Jesus seems to be gently pointing out their flaws. Nicknames do that sometimes too, like when you call your cynical friend Mr. Sunshine. The thunder in James and John was OK, it helped them sometimes, but it also caused them to overdo things. It makes them ambitious in the worst sense of the word. So over the course of their life, Jesus teaches the sons of Thunder a new way: the way of humble service. James becomes one of the first Martyrs in the church, killed by Herod only a little while after Pentecost. John survived longer than his brother but in his own gospel, he doesn't call himself the Son of Thunder, he doesn't put himself out there. In fact he doesn't use his own name at all. He calls himself simply: the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Jesus' nickname of the Zebedee boys is both a celebration of their character and a gentle call to humility, to servanthood. Jesus calls their name and his affectionate nickname is part of the process which changes them from people who measure themselves by their achievements and their status in the Kingdom, to people who measure themselves by the amount of love that their Lord has for them. That's a journey we're all learning to make.

Barnabas - Acts 4:32-37

I bet that if I'd asked as a Bible question, what was Barnabas' real name, most of you wouldn't have gotten it. Most of us here, and I include myself, would have thought that Barnabas was the given name of the man we know as Paul's companion on his missionary journeys. But it wasn't his given name; it was a nickname, given to Joseph the Levite, given to him because of his generosity and his gift of encouragement. Joseph the Levite was such a sunny guy, such a faithful friend, such a considerate person that nobody called him Joseph any more. They simply called him Mr. Encouragement. This is a slightly different kind of nickname. Not a name given to represent who he would be some day, not a name given to gently challenge a rough spot in a personality. This is a name given in celebration of a spiritual gift.

And even though there aren't a lot of Barnabas stories in the New Testament, the few that there are reveal to us a man who really was an encourager. We first meet Barnabas when he makes the great gift to the disciples – giving all the money from the sale of his field to the ministry of the Way. That's certainly an act of encouragement. The next time we see him, he's standing beside Paul as Paul meets the leaders of the church for the first time after his conversion. The leaders of the church are suspicious of Paul. This was the man who had been throwing their friends in jail and signing the execution orders and now he was supposedly changed? They were dubious. But it was Barnabas who encouraged Paul by standing up beside

him before the leaders and saying, *“This man has changed. This man is on our side. Trust him!”* And then it was Barnabas who was an encouragement to John Mark. John Mark was the young believer who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Unfortunately he didn’t last long. He was homesick after only a short time away and he went home. When Paul and Barnabas went to set out on their second journey, Mark wanted another chance. Paul said, “No Way!!” Apparently thinking, without any sense of self irony, that it was impossible for someone to change. Barnabas however was the encourager. He wanted Mark along. He wanted to give the boy a second chance. The disagreement was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas ended up going their separate ways. Barnabas was an encourager. He saw the best in people.

What’s interesting about Barnabas’ nickname is that he received it from the church, not directly from God or from Jesus like the other names in this service. That’s an interesting trend. It makes me wonder if naming each other isn’t part of the job of the church now, in the age of Pentecost. Not that we have to give each other nicknames, but that we name each other’s gifts; that we help each other find and name our gifts so that we can find our role in the church and so we can find our role in the world. That’s how Barnabas’ name worked for him. Every time someone spoke his name he knew what gift the Spirit had given him. Every time someone in the community needed an encouraging word, they didn’t have to think very hard about where to go to find one. If we could be the sort of church that helped each other find each other’s names and learn each other’s names, we would all be barnabases and batnabases. We’d all be sons and daughters of encouragement.

Jacob - Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob’s names are so interesting. His original name means grabber, which perfectly captures his ambitious, conniving nature. Wheeling and dealing with Esau. Grabbing the birthright. Wheeling and dealing with his Uncle Laban. Grabbing Laban’s daughters. But now in this story he’s grabbing again, only now he’s grabbing in a whole way, now he’s grabbing at God; wrestling him at the ford of the Jabbok. This new round of grabbing leads God to give him a new name, but it’s not a name that’s completely different from his old name, in a way it’s very similar to his old name. God names him Israel, which means something like: He strives with God. It’s still a name which implies grabbing. But there is one important difference in the nature of the grabbing: now Jacob isn’t wrestling with the people around him, now his name reminds him that his true struggle is with God.

It’s a name that reminds him and reminds us that life is not finally a horizontal struggle: men and women pushing and grabbing at each other trying to stay ahead and alive. We live that way sometimes, as if all our problems had horizontal solutions. But at its depth, life is finally a vertical struggle. Our life is an engagement with God. Life is an eighty year striving with the

One who made us and called us. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we sing our praises, we shout our laments, we lift up praises, we hurl questions, we struggle with Him and at the end of it, we fall exhausted into his hands. How fitting that this name becomes the name not just of this man, but of all God's people. The story of God's Old Testament people is the story of a whole nation striving with God, wounded by him, Israel is their name and Israel is their story.

Israel is who we are too. Not that God is our enemy and our combatant, but our engagement with God is a spirited, challenging kind of thing; much more like a wrestling match than a Sunday stroll. It all started at our baptism. At the font we are named. At this font we become part of God's family. At the font he says, "I am your Father; you are my child." And then the engagement begins. For three score and ten years, and four score if we have the strength, we work out our salvation. We try to figure out who we are. We try to discover our place in God's family. And our Father is not always so gentle along the way. Sometimes his grip pinches and twists. But even in the struggle his love for us is unquestioned. Because at the end of the struggle our faces may be tears-stained and we might be wounded and limping like Jacob, but when we look at the one we've been wrestling we realize that our blows, our anger, our rage has nailed him to a cross. He came to save us and we grabbed him, nailed him up and spit in his face. But even here the grip of his love was stronger than our rebellion. Jesus rises from the dead, spread his arms out over the world so that we could know that our struggle will have a good ending.

And so someday it will be us, limping like Jacob into the sunrise of the new creation. Our journey will be over and we will be ready to meet the Lord with whom and for whom we have struggled our whole lives. And he will speak our name, and we will see his face and he will grab us, not in a wrestler's embrace this time, but in the embrace of a parent welcoming his child home.

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