

**Sermon for October 20, 2019 – Proper 24C**  
**Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio**  
**The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

***Tell Me Your Name: The Power of a Name***

*“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.”* Oh, I could fire back at my classmates as they would taunt me on the playground. And I did just that... but the fact is, that silly little saying was never ever true. Name-calling hurts. Oh, I really liked my first name, Judith. I sensed a strength of character about it, even a persistence in the face of challenge or danger. It was my last name growing up that was so challenging to bear. Perhaps, though, if I had grown up in San Antonio, it would have been a kinder and gentler name to bear... You see, I am a “Butt.” And growing up with that moniker was not always easy.

This is the power of names, isn't it? Some research has been done on how people fare in life if they like or dislike their name. And the research claims that if you like your name, you fare better in the various circumstances that life presents.

I was also reflecting on the challenge and opportunity of choosing a name of a saint on the occasion of one's Confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. Having been educated by Dominican Sisters for the first twelve years of my life, I was quite familiar with St. Catherine of Siena. Born in 1347, Catherine joined the Third Order of St. Dominic which allowed her to associate with a religious society while living at home. She is venerated as a mystic by the church and is one of only two women saints to be designated a “Doctor of the Church.” What I loved about her was her courage to work against the abuses of power within the church. She publicly called for reforms in the church and even called for the Pope in Avignon to return to Rome. There was a name and a narrative that I truly was drawn to respect, even as a young teenaged Roman Catholic girl. Little did I know how my life's journey would unfold. And to this day, Catherine remains my namesake. On Tuesdays, our RMI friends, Peggy and Mario, always address me as “Catherine.” I don't know how they ever got to think of me as “Catherine” but how I love hearing them call my name!

This week's Hebrew Scripture from Genesis is a powerful testimony not only about persistence in the face of challenge but also addresses the power of names: the names we've been given, the names we've taken on ourselves, the names that limit us by defining us, and pre-eminently the new name, the Beloved of God, we have always been created to be.

This Genesis narrative begs for an expanded context, the saga about Jacob, which in truth can be divided into two main stories. The first revolves around Jacob's immediate family. As you may recall, he is the second born of the twins of Isaac and Rebekah. He is not only the younger of the two but also the more slight of stature and so he learns early on to live by his wits rather than his strength. His brother, Esau, by contrast is a wild and woolly hunter, and, as the eldest, is heir to his father's blessing and fortune.

The rivalry between these two siblings is palpable as the favor of the father is Esau's and of the mother, Isaac's. For a pot of stew, Esau exchanges his birthright. And a few years later, Isaac deceives his father and steals Esau's blessing. One commentator writes: "The first act in this drama of Jacob's life closes with his brothers distraught and enraged wails providing the backdrop to Jacob's cowardly flight to the household of his uncle Laban.

Well, the second act of this narrative revolves around Jacob's years with his equally deceitful uncle. Time and again these two come to blows and eventually Jacob flees once more, taking with him two of Laban's daughters, most of his flock, and much of his fortune.

As the scene is set for the text before us today, Jacob is still enroute from Laban's home when he receives word that his brother, Esau, is coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. Sitting as it were, between a rock and a hard place, Jacob hides half of his wealth, and then with what is left, he sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau intending to bribe his way into his brother's good graces. And this is where we meet Jacob, today... as he sends the rest of his servants, and family across the river, hoping perhaps that even if Esau refuses the gifts, he may at the very least take pity on the sight of his defenseless wives and children. And we thought soap operas were only on tv in the afternoons!

And just as the soap operas drag on and on, so do Jacob's troubles!! Pacing by a dark and troubled river frustrated by his own schemes and feeble contingencies, Jacob is attacked by what can only seem like a demon. All night long the two wrestle, until, as daylight approaches and Jacob seems on the verge of prevailing, his opponent dislocates his hip and demands release. "Bless me first," Jacob cries, perceiving that whether this be an angel or demon, this is no ordinary creature. To which his adversary, soon to be revealed as the Lord, responds, "***Tell me your name.***"

It is essential for us to understand the significance that names held in near-Eastern cultures. For far from merely identifying a person, names in Jacob's culture

reveal one's essential character and sometimes their destiny. The change of a name by the Divine always signifies a total transformation of life.

Jacob's name literally means, "usurper" ... or loosely, "the cheat." And deep down Jacob knows that he has lived as a fraud and a scoundrel. So, when the Lord pins Jacob down and demands to know his name, he is demanding no less than Jacob confess his shoddy character and wasted life. It must have felt to Jacob as a death for nothing else is left of his life but to confess and receive his punishment.

Except that the Lord does not punish Jacob, and instead, gives him a new name. The Lord calls him Israel, the one who has wrestled with God as with man and has prevailed. So Jacob limps away not defeated but victorious, carrying a new name and character. A new person, a new life given him by the Divine.

As the Beloved of God, for that is our deepest identity, you and I have wrestled, no doubt, with the names we have been called by others, or the labels and limits we have accepted about ourselves.

What are the names by which you have been known? And what are the names, identities and limits you have come to accept about yourself?

During our 50<sup>th</sup> year celebration and certainly, in this time of transition as we prayerfully consider what we say about who we are in a parish profile that invites deep discernment to those who may consider a call here as our next Rector, we are immersed in the significance of language that speaks the depths of the truth of how this parish came about; what was the dream and vision at the very beginning of our life? Who have we become in the fifty years since? And what is God's dream, God's mission for Church of Reconciliation going forward?

So, what's in our name, Church of Reconciliation? One person has written:

*"Our name signifies God's reconciling love through Christ: an unconditional love that reconciles broken relationships; a love that holds the dynamic tensions of different ideologies, races, identities and politics.*

*This is Church of Reconciliation, an ever-expanding circle of welcome to anyone because everyone is a child of God."*

Therefore, It seems to me, that when you prayerfully discern to become a member at this parish, Church of Reconciliation, one commits herself/himself to be ever more intentionally and prayerfully a "Reconciler" in the world. Such a name as "Reconciler" speaks of the power of presence, and deep rootedness in the Way of Jesus, as peacemaker, pain-bearer, life-giver whereby we pray to become more like the One

we receive, in the very ordinariness of daily life. So just as we might answer someone who asks our name and we respond with our baptismal name... we might also think about responding to the statement, "Tell me your name." with... "Reconciler", for that is who you and I are called to be.

This biblical text places before us the power of names: those we have been given, those we have accepted all too easily, and the burdens that come with those names. So, I invite you, like Jacob, to wrestle, too. What are some of those names we have taken on in our lives? What have you willingly named yourself? Whatever is no longer true, or what was never true, surrender all those names into the healing grace of the Divine.

And then... ***and this is equally important...*** Hear God speak, God's name for you... "You are my Beloved! With you I am well pleased! Go and live the life I have given you to live... the life of my Beloved."

My friends, what if, just what if, this church, this Body of Christ, this parish family, is a place we can come to each week and bring all our other names with us, confessing them honestly, and then leaving them here at the altar? What if when we extend our hands to receive the bread of heaven and cup of salvation, we hear our name, Beloved, spoken by the One who redeemed us from all that would burden or destroy our very souls? What if, when we leave this beautiful sanctuary we go forth as a courageous Reconciler the world so desperately needs?

*"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me!"* That's the stuff of immaturity and despair. It's simply not true. So, you and I have a choice to make. We can be bent over and burdened by the names we choose to accept for ourselves... or we can stand in the great communion of saints and be known by our deepest identity, the name we have been given by our Creator, the very "Beloveds of God."

Amen.