

We are into something new around here this morning: wearing name tags. It's certainly not an original idea on our part. There are plenty of places we go where we're invited, even asked, to wear a name tag. I go into my kids' school to volunteer, and I have to stop in the main office now and get a name tag. This way, when I'm walking the hallways, the teachers and students know I'm supposed to be there. If even for just one hour on a Tuesday morning, I belong there, I have a purpose, it is to be a reading or math helper. My name tag says so. And everyone else is wearing a name tag, too. This way, when I'm sitting down at a table with a group of children, and I need to ask a question, or get one child's attention, I can call them by name. Being able to call one another by name makes us, for better or for worse, responsible.

Still, "I'm not sure I like the idea of having to wear a name tag in church," a couple people have said to me in the build-up to today.

I feel that I understand this sentiment, because I've had the same thought. It's not that I don't care to know your name, it's that I have this idea of church as being a place where you don't need name tags because everybody already knows your name. And for the majority of us, I think this is true. We know each other's name, and then some. Most churches don't change a whole lot at once. This means that churches are a great place to be known. Show up often enough, and it won't take long before you'll know the majority of the people, and the majority of the people will know you. This is especially true in a smaller church like ours. You'd have a hard time slipping in and out of here without being noticed.

Of course, if you're following along, then you might now be asking yourself, "Yes, but what about people who just don't want to wear a nametag? They figure that if people want to know their name, they should ask. Or the people who'd prefer not to wear a name tag because, well, there's something very personal and permanent about having people know your name. And I'm just here checking the place out. I'm not even sure I'm going to come back. If I give them my name and allow them to make me a name tag, they might get the wrong idea about my level of commitment. Or the people who show up late and don't have

time to grab their name tag? Or the people who just don't want to do what the majority is doing? Aren't there always going to be people without a name tag? And isn't that only going to make it obvious who is and is not a part of the majority?"

Yes, there is that great risk. So let me just say this: it's not about the name tags. It's about doing everything we can to call one another by name, because names matter to God.

Read the Bible from cover to cover and you'll see that the most prominent feature of the whole book—Genesis to Revelation—are the names, and what you'll notice about the names is that they always tell a story, and the story is never only about the person whose name it is. It's also about the person who gave the name, and what was going on in the world, and what needed to change in the world, at the time when the name was given.

Take a small baby boy born back in Exodus chapter 2. Born to a Hebrew slave woman, on the day this particular baby comes into the world, Pharaoh makes an edict that all the Hebrew newborns like this baby must be thrown into the Nile. Pharaoh is suddenly feeling a bit uneasy about his hold on power, and this is a way for him to keep any slave child from ever growing up to take it away from him. The baby's mother, of course, panics. To protect her child, she hides him in a basket and floats the basket down river. Her hope is that he will get picked up by someone who has the power to save his life. It's an incredible gamble that pays off when, of all people, the Pharaoh's own daughter comes upon the basket. She knows what she is supposed to do, she knows what her father has said, "Drown the Hebrew babies." But in an act of civil disobedience, she instead rescues the child. She names him Moses. Does she know that this Hebrew child, whose name means "one who was lifted out of the water," will grow up to lift every last Hebrew out of slavery? Does she know that by her one act of civil disobedience, she has set in motion a social revolution that will topple oppression and her own family's place in the world? Does she know that by giving the enemy a name like Moses, she is giving the enemy the hope of one day not having to play the enemy? I like to think that on the day Pharaoh's daughter named a Hebrew baby Moses, she knew exactly what she was doing.

What's in a name? Some are given names meant to destine them for great change in the world, like Moses, or Abraham, whose name means "Father of many nations," or Gabriel, meaning "Mighty Warrior." Others are given names as reminder of just how much the world isn't changing. Like the woman in Judges 13 whose name was Zoar, meaning

“scab.” For years, this woman stood in the world as one who had been picked at, and picked over, so many times. Penniless and childless, she had no hope of anything ever changing. And yet, her name wasn’t just a reminder of how bruised and beaten she had become, it was also a reminder of just how much she had survived. Until one day, having survived enough, her scab fell off and she found herself pregnant with a boy whom she would name Samson, which in Hebrew means, “sunshine.”

What’s in a name? Some of us are given names that feel like a privilege to put on. I’m reminded of a woman I met at preaching conference I attended in Atlanta about 10 years ago. For 3 days, I sat listening to various preachers, all well-known, do their thing. After one sermon in which the preacher was covering Paul’s words to the church at Galatia—“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”—the woman sitting in the pew beside me said, “He stopped short.”

“What do you mean?”

“He didn’t finish the sermon. I’m going up there.”

She went up front. I followed her. She seemed annoyed, disappointed. Where’s she going? What’s she going to do? She stood in line to speak with the preacher. “My name is Yolanda. I’m from Mississippi. I’m here because I’ve been called to the ministry. I am black, I am a woman, and I don’t think Jesus would want you to forget that.”

I’m reminded of what the late Fred Craddock, professor of homiletics at the Chandler School of Theology once said. He said, there is a dangerous tendency with preaching to try and say too much only to end up saying nothing at all. Or, to put it another way, in our great effort to say something to everyone, we end saying nothing to anyone, because we don’t want to offend anyone. So we make all the language sound generic, and we try not to speak about anything specific. We don’t name anyone. The problem with this, however, is that when God wanted to say something to the world, God didn’t speak in generalizations. God said, “I am the God of all creation, and I love you.” But God didn’t just roll all the clouds up into one big ball and say, “I love you.” No, God sent a Jew born of a virgin from Nazareth.

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Saks says, we don't learn to love universally. We might set out to love everyone, but it doesn't start there. Rather, we learn to love by loving particularly. By loving *that* kid in the cafeteria, or *that* co-worker at the water cooler, or *that* person in the pew; you know the one, because you've been trying not to notice them. What's their name?

If some people wear their name around like a badge of honor, others have to try and ride along on the back of someone else's name.

The seven sons of Sceva in Acts chapter 19. I pity them really for what they tried to do one day, seeing a crowd of people with an evil spirit in them. No one wanted to touch these people, no one wanted to call any attention to them, so we don't even know any of their names. And one day the Apostle Paul comes to town and everyone sees that by just letting the sick and diseased touch his clothing, Paul is able to make them well. The seven sons of Sceva say, "We want to be able to do that," and they go out to meet the crowd riding along on the back of Paul's coattails. But when they get there, nothing happens. The evil spirits recognize what they're trying to do and say in reply, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Just because you say you're with Paul, just because you want to have power like Jesus, doesn't mean you do.

What's in a name? I asked Jesus this question one day. I said Jesus, you had a name that made some people shout and praise, and some people to shout and curse. How did you handle it? What did you do? And he said to me, "Whoever welcome a child in my name, welcomes me. Whoever gives a cold cup of water to a thirsty beggar in my name, gives it to me. And whoever, whoever at all, gives up their life for the sake of love, can have my name to call their own."

Amen.