

20 June 2010
St. John's Oakland
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Proper 7C/Jonathan Kitt's Baptism
Luke 8:26-39
Galatians 3:23-29

Name this child. John...

John, remember the day of your baptism. Ann, remember the day of your baptism. Ray, remember the day of your baptism...

In Godly Play classrooms around the Episcopal Diocese of California, we give each child a candle to hold as we say these words. The experiential lesson being that the illumination of the room grows with the addition of each person's light. But of course any child would tell you that its really all about the fun of playing with fire in enclosed spaces. And any Godly Play storyteller would tell you that this is one truly high risk Sunday school lesson. No less so here than at La Santisima Trinidad in Richmond, where John and I have been teaching primary Spanish-speaking children for the past two years. But today its my pleasure to be back at St. John's, playing with fire together with you.

If I were ever tempted to imagine that baptism were anything less than a high-risk endeavor, today's lessons would put that illusion to rest. My name is Legion, the man plagued by demons says to Jesus. Really? What happened to his other name, the one given to him by his parents and his community? The story doesn't say, and nor is the man's true name ever mentioned in the text. Jesus simply evicts the multitude of demons, and sends a nameless man back to his hometown, presumably to deal with the fallout of its economic base having been contaminated and drowned. You could think of the demon-infested swine running into the lake as a first century equivalent to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Bear this in mind when hear Jonathan Kitt's parents and godparents renounce the powers that corrupt and destroy.

So on the day when we welcome a new member into the body of Christ, this gospel stands as a cautionary tale. Are our names given to us, and our identities formed, in a way that manifests the truth that we are profoundly loved by God? Or do we let demons speak for us? I'd love to say its not the latter, but the fact is that unclean spirits really do have power to name us. It happens all the time. For example, who among us have not been tempted to internalize names like "the smart one," or "the dumb one." To let ourselves be known as the one who is "not pretty enough, not good enough, the one who goes to the wrong school or drives the wrong car or doesn't make enough money." These are demons who would usurp our true identities. In our families—even in our churches—they are Legion.

We also let our tribe, class and gender speak for us. Paul addresses this distortion directly in his letter to the Galatians, when he recites the categories of Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female. These were divisive social constructs which could not be permitted to override the fellowship of followers of Jesus, according to Paul. But of course they did—and they still do—or he would not have had to bother teaching about it and we would not still be preaching about it.

All of which raises an interesting question for me about names, identities and social categories. Despite the fact that Paul preached unity, names are, after all, highly individual. We are not all being baptized as Jonathan Riedel Gavriel today, even though that's a very good name. So was it

singularity of identity that Paul wanted for a Jewish and gentile church when he wrote of being “one in Christ Jesus,” or might his reference to Abraham’s offspring challenge us to deeper understandings of our particular calling as a diverse community?

Pamela Eisenbaum, a Jewish scholar of Christian origins who teaches at the United Methodist Iliff School of Theology in Denver—how’s that for diversity—argues that to interpret Galatians 3:28 as a manifesto for erasing human difference misunderstands Paul’s vision for the church. Rather than a cultural homogeneity, she says that he was imagining a new kind of family. Hence the reference to Abraham’s common fatherhood. Families may have traits in common, but they actually require the regular union of unrelated people in order to regenerate.

A key phrase in her interpretation of today’s lesson being “no longer male and female.” That’s an awkward grammatical construction—seems like it ought to be “no longer male nor female”—unless we hear it as a direct reference to Genesis 1: “male and female he created them.” In Creation, it was particularity of gender in relationship that made procreation possible; in Christ, it is particularity of Jew and Greek in transformed relationship makes the new family possible.

A common theme in these two lessons is not the diminishment of particular identities—neither personal nor social—but rather the removal of false labels and the creation of family from diverse community. Luke makes the same point even more explicit, when he records Jesus saying—in verse 8: 21 which precedes today’s lesson—that that his mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

Who then emerges as the family of this Jewish rabbi? None other than a crazy gentile swineherd, to whom Jesus said “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” He heard and he did. “So he went away,” the gospel records, “proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”

In the family of Jesus, to which we welcome Jonathan today, we hear and do the word of God when we welcome his particularity as a boy, a son, a brother, a Jew, a Christian, a Kitt. None of these specific truths make him less than Abraham’s offspring, but the nature of this church family of choice is that Jonathan can’t get there on biology alone. He’ll need us—his brothers and sisters—to show him how to live into the truth of his name and the strength of his baptismal identity.

He’ll need us to light a hundred dangerous candles with him, teach him our stories, take him on mission trips, encourage him in wisdom, forgive him in foolishness, strengthen him when he is fainthearted and listen to him when he has uncomfortably prophetic things to say to us.

Most of all, he’ll need us to remind him—and we’ll need him to remind us—that the demons of culture and class and false selves do not have naming rights in this community. Because regardless of whether we are the newest member of the baptized or the oldest, we are more than the sum of what we have done or left undone, more that what destructive spirits have told us we are supposed to do. We are more than our self-doubts, more than our fears, more than our cultural labels. We are beloved children of God... and we can light up the world with that.