

PROPER EIGHT, PENTECOST SIX, YEAR B, JUNE 30, 2024

How many of you have nicknames? Usually that nickname is given to you by others to describe something about you. Sometimes those nicknames are pretty hard to shake whether they are accurate or not or even whether we like them or not. There are some nicknames that go back to our childhood that we might have spent a lifetime trying to forget only to run into an old friend from the neighborhood who immediately shouts out that nickname that you despise. It is fascinating to realize the power a nickname or a descriptor has on us. When you name just one reality about an individual – whether that’s true or not – they tend to reduce all of who you are to that one dimension and that’s what makes nicknames difficult for most people.

But nicknames also encompass the names and labels we put on those who differ from us whether in skin color or ethnicity or belief. These are the names we have hung on and hurled at others to reduce and objectify them. We are, by nature, social, even tribal, creatures, and so we gather with those who seem like us and characterize those who don’t as different, naming them by some attribute that creates convenient definitions and borders for us which strips others of their individuality and labeling and lumping them together.

The power of names or naming is extremely formidable. In today’s Gospel, Jesus is greeted by a crowd as his fame and reputation have spread. Among that crowd is a man named Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, who begs Jesus to heal his daughter. And on the way to do that, Jesus is interrupted...and then it happens – someone’s name is changed and their future is restored.

Among the crowd is a woman. She is given no name. She is described only as a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. But we know her condition rendered her ritually unclean — not just for a day or a week or a month, but indefinitely. She could not enter the Temple, the heart and soul of her religious community. She could not touch or be touched by anyone without rendering them unclean, too. By the time she approached Jesus, she had spent every penny she owned, and “endured much under many physicians” to find relief but to no avail. The woman’s very body — its femaleness had become a source of isolation and disgrace. She was an outcast, an embarrassment and a pariah. She was lonely beyond description.

In a desperate and stunning act of civil disobedience she defied the religious rules of her day to pursue an encounter with Jesus. She knew she had no business polluting the crowds with her presence and was forbidden to touch any man, least of all Jesus. She knew that even her fingertips on his cloak would defile him. But she decided to touch him anyway and she was healed. But what happens next is what is truly remarkable and is the true healing.

We’re told Jesus felt what is described as his power leaving him and he asked who touched him. There are swarms of people touching Jesus which makes his disciples incredulous that he wants to know who touched him. And then, this woman who is absolutely terrified comes forward to tell her story and she tells him her whole truth. Jesus recognized that she had spent twelve years having other people define her and impose their narratives, their interpretations, their assumptions and their prejudices on her. She had been reduced to a caricature that was shamed into silence by her religion. Jesus knew she needed to tell her whole truth in the presence of the

community and more than healing her of her ailment it is the restoration to fellowship, dignity and humanity that is far more important. By calling her daughter he recognizes her as a child of God and a full inclusive member of God's kingdom.

To put this woman's story in modern terms it is not unlike many victims of sexual abuse. For too many victims telling their truth, especially to their immediate family, is often met with horror as it is too scandalous, too taboo to even whisper about. And if it involved someone the family knew that is inconceivable to even comprehend. It is better not to speak of these things and to keep those "kinds" of things in the dark. In many respects having loved ones turn away from their story is a trauma nearly as damaging as the abuse itself. Many victims end up finding others who can help them bear their story. This means helping them shoulder the shame and bringing it into the light by listening to them with grace and compassion that helps with their healing.

In both of the stories in today's Gospel, the healing of Jairus' daughter and the woman with an issue of blood Jesus is showing us there is life where others see death. Jesus sees value where others do not. Jesus is telling us not to be so quick with our assumptions because they're usually not helpful or accurate.

Names – whether nicknames or some other descriptor – are convenient because they work to summarize a lot of things into one element. But they are also dangerous because they reduce us, strip us of our individuality and uniqueness, and label us according to what someone else sees.

Yet Jesus does the exact opposite. Jesus is constantly crossing borders – whether geographic or social – to see people for who they are and to draw them into relationship. That's why the woman who touched Jesus is no longer just "woman" or "the one who has been bleeding for twelve years." She is now "daughter," one restored to family and community and health and life.

This is, of course, Jesus' charge to us as well. He wants us to see people for who they really are, unique persons, each created in the image of God, and each worthy of our attention, care, love, and respect. Yet let's be honest: simply saying that isn't enough. We know that the discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or religion or economic status that happens on the streets of cities and towns across the country every single day is terribly and tragically wrong. We know this but too often we participate in it.

What might make a difference, however, is recognizing that we, too, often are labeled, reduced to one attribute or incident that hardly captures our identity and yet has named and shaped our behavior and our future in ways that are unhealthy and unhelpful. So perhaps the task this week is to invite all of you to call to mind those names you have been given that you despise and somehow have defined you. And then to say that Jesus sees you differently. Jesus names you differently. You are "daughter" and "son" and "beloved of God" and more.

It comes down to this. God always sees a unique and beloved individual worthy of love, honor, and respect. Perhaps when we truly acknowledge and accept how God sees us we can resist the urge to use destructive names to define and label and reduce others. Perhaps then we can reach out in love to call those around us – and especially those whom society has overlooked – brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, all children of God.

The woman who bled, the man who failed, the girl who dropped out of high school, the kid who got hooked on drugs, the family with no home. These are not the names God has in store for us. This week, it's our privilege to name people anew – beloved child of God – and to set people free to walk into a future of hope and promise. Don't ever forget you are known and named as a child of God as is everyone – that's the beginning to true healing of differences. Amen.