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“To Whom He Gave the Name....”

Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30 NRSV So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."..So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

Mark 3:13-19 NRSV He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So he appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

When Barbara and I lived in Hawaii, we learned about the history of the U.S. Army's 442nd Brigade. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, many of the islands residents – United States citizens, born and raised there – wanted to enlist to serve their country. But for a long time, the government would not let them. You see, these folks were the sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters of Japanese who had come to the islands to work the sugar cane plantations a generation or two earlier. And the government was fearful that these folks weren't really loyal, and, as I'm sure you know, even interned thousands and thousands of them in isolated and awful camps, despite

the fact that during the entire war there was not one instance of an American of Japanese descent ever seeking to harm the United States. Finally, the government relented and allowed these folks to enlist into what became the 442nd Brigade¹, which went on to become the most-decorated unit in US. military history (including twenty-one Congressional Medal of Honor recipients). Men in the islands came into the recruiting offices by the thousands, even those whose own relatives had been shamefully interned by the very government they wanted to fight for (an act, by the way, for which President Ronald Reagan apologized²). One of the members of my congregation in Hawaii, along with two of his friends, went to the enlistment office. His name was Tsukasa Ishii. When he and his friends got to the head of the line, the recruiter asked their names. Upon hearing them, the recruiter told the three, *“Those names are just too damn hard. So, from now on,”* he said, pointing at each one in turn, *“your name is Tom, you’re Dick, and you’re Harry.”* So, from that day forward, as far as the government was concerned he was “Harry Ishii.” And his new name forever changed his life: to vote, to buy the house that he and his beloved bride shared, to become the postmaster of his tiny town, and every other way, large and small, he now had to do so under the name of “Harry.”

What is the point of this story? Just this: **the names that we bear are always related to our calling.** Let me say that again: *the names that we bear are always related to our calling.* Think about it – Tsukasa Harry Ishii’s new name came out of his sense of call to serve his country (even if the circumstances of that naming were a testimony to racism). But let me invite you to think of some examples from your own lives: Every parent in this room knows that throat-catching, tear-evoking moment when your baby first addresses you as “Mommy” or “Daddy,” and you know in the deepest

¹Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/442nd_Infantry_Regiment_%28United_States%29

²Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internment_of_Japanese_Americans

way that that name is indeed related to the calling you have taken on to love and nurture this tiny human being. Every pastor who has ever been ordained experiences a moment of awe and trembling when, after being ordained, is addressed, perhaps for the first time, with a new name – “Reverend” – signifying a calling to care for and equip the saints for ministry. Every teacher knows that moment of pride when a difficult student is helped to overcome a challenge and says “*Thank you, teacher,*” calling you by a name that denotes a sacred calling to teach, whatever the subject matter, the ways of empathy, imagination, and respect for self and others. When Jesus tells the disciples in the gospel of John that he no longer addresses them as servants but is now naming them as his friends, each of us can relate to the calling we have with our friends to be those who care with constancy, support, and guidance. In our Old Testament scripture for today, when those seventy folks along with Eldad and Medad are charged with assisting Moses and are given the name “spirit-filled,” they know that their new names denote a sacred calling to, in the words of Barbara Blaisdell, “proclaim... God's love and justice for all not only by what they said but by how they acted and what they did.”³

You see, we are all given a name at birth, but in the course of our lives we also will receive and take on and even seek out many other names and all of ***those*** names ***are related to a calling that we have received.*** This morning I want to think a little bit with you about that fact as we continue the series on the Gospel of Mark that Pastor Katherine has so ably been sharing with you, and as we look specifically at Mark’s telling of how Jesus called the Twelve. But first, notice sometime that has very much to do with the relation between one’s name and one’s call: In our scripture for the morning, this is actually the third time that Jesus asks folks to follow Him. The first time was along the Sea of Galilee where he told Simon, Andrew, James, and John to follow. The

Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, “Priesthood of All Believers,” a sermon preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, February 15, 2015.

second time was when he spotted Matthew, busy collecting taxes for the Romans, and called him to also come along. In the meantime, Mark tells of the great crowds who followed Jesus, of the healings he did, of the miracles he performed. And only then comes the naming of the Twelve. And the key to this verse is that among the many, many folks who were following Jesus by that time, the many who might even count themselves as His disciples, He now gives a new name and new calling to twelve of those. They are to be his **Apostles**. What does that mean? Well, before we go on to look at that question, I have to note that the written accounts we have in our Bible do a huge disservice to one group of folks: women. It is very likely that it was women who financially supported Jesus' ability to do his work; women were the ones who were faithful at the cross, first at the tomb, and the first to believe and tell of the resurrection when the men would not believe. In fact, there **are** other traditions that suggest that there were in fact apostles who *were* indeed women. Paul, for example, mentions a woman named Junia as one of the prominent apostles.⁴ The history of how this tradition was generally forgotten and even suppressed sometimes is a story for another time. But what we **can** say is that **whoever** would find themselves called as one of Christ's Apostles will fit what I am about to describe about the connection between that name and what an apostle is called to do.

You see, when Jesus gives the name "Apostle" to these twelve, as the story has it, He was connecting their new name with a new calling and a new mission. And that calling and that mission consists of three tasks; listen carefully to Mark's words again: *"And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons."* In other words, the very name "Apostle" is inextricably linked with a **calling to be with Jesus, to proclaim His love and grace through word and deed, and to seek to heal people**

⁴Romans 16:7 Cf. <http://www.godswordtowomen.org/rissjunia.htm>

of what is hurting them. And now, as heirs to the Apostles ourselves, chosen by Jesus Himself, we too are named and given the same mission and calling. Let's look a little at each one.

First, the Apostles were called and we are called **“to be with Jesus.”** It's instructive that that's the first one listed. It reminds me of our church's Mission and Vision statement that says we want to be about growing in faith and deepening our spirituality. And the reality is that that calling *needs* to be the first calling. If you do not take care of your own relationship to the living God, through prayer and study and meditation and seeking the counsel of other folks who journey this way with you, you will find yourself an empty vessel trying to feed a hungry world. And it will burn you out. Or you will resent it. Or you will stop remembering why you are doing the good deeds that you want to do, forgetting that talking about **why** you do what you do – because you know a God of unconditional grace! – is just as important as the doing itself. Where do **you** find those occasions and opportunities to know a deeper relationship to God through Jesus Christ? If you are having trouble finding those, let's talk...

The second apostolic task is **“to proclaim God's love and grace through word and deed.”** I have always admired the eloquent succinctness of St. Francis of Assisi's remark *“Preach the gospel at all times; use words when necessary,”* but I believe in this day and age, especially, our good acts are just not enough by themselves, and we must, as I said, remember always to give voice to **why** we are seeking to act out our knowledge of a God of gentleness and grace. And make no mistake, there is both a hunger and a need for such proclamation. Thirty percent of the Christian books and movies and songs last year were read and seen and listened to by folks who were unchurched.⁵ Why are they un-churched when they are clearly seeking a connection to

⁵[2015/february/third-audience-christian-books-radio-movies-unchurched-nrb.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/february/third-audience-christian-books-radio-movies-unchurched-nrb.html)
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/>

something beyond themselves? One of the most common remarks that visitors to First Christian make to me is that “*we didn’t know there was a church like this.*” And when I press them about what they mean, their answers point to our intention - when we are at our best – to witness to a God who is not about joyless judgmentalism but about generous and gentle grace Who does not especially care how you dress, how many tattoos you have, whether you love the new songs or the old hymns (or neither!), what your orientation is, or whether you’ve got more questions than answers. In an era in which twenty- and thirty-somethings are leaving churches in droves because, study after study show, they believe that “the Church” is banal, bigoted, or boring, we have an opportunity and an obligation as ones who bear the latter day name and mission of Jesus’ apostles to show them something different.

The third task for those of us named and called by God through Christ is **to seek to heal people of what is hurting them.** Jesus’ language is to “cast out demons,” but when all is said and done, a demon is simply something that is controlling you, hurting you, that should not be. Sometimes the healing of such demons happens best without words. Catholic theologian and writer Henri Nouwen once said: “*When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who... have chosen... to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, ... that is a friend who cares.*”⁶ I hope you have a friend like that; I hope you want to be a friend like that. I hope that you will seek opportunities help heal and cast out demons by that powerful ministry of presence. But I also hope, again, you will, as we tell our toddlers, “use your words” when the time is ripe for that. For too many people have voices in their heads that are

⁶Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*, quoted at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1392-when-we-honestly-ask-ourselves-which-person-in-our-lives>

harsh and unforgiving, that keep whispering to them about regrets and what-if's, that sometimes tell them they are worthless. And that's where healing indeed begins – with words. It's instructive that most of the healings that Jesus did were indeed accompanied by words, and those words were the beginning of healing and wholeness, and such a word is so often the necessary first step to becoming un-trapped by whatever demons are haunting, whatever hurts are festering, whatever possibilities are being stunted.

My friends, my time of educational leave and sabbatical was rich and full, and what it reaffirmed for me is that our congregation is poised and ready to continue our growth in every way. There is much I have to share with you, and much I want to hear from you. But I don't want to deluge you either all at once. There will be lots of time and opportunity for us to continue to discern how we do indeed best continue to grow in depth, in spirit, in service, in numbers. My intention is to devote the weeks following Easter to that topic explicitly, sharing with you what I have learned and incorporating what you have learned. But the reason that I selected this scripture from Mark for today is that I am convinced that we truly are – and truly want to be – ones who are indeed Jesus' latter-day apostles, who have been given that name because we are indeed called with the mission of knowing God through Jesus Christ ever more deeply, of proclaiming the gospel of grace ever more clearly, and seeking to heal this too often hurting and broken world ever more nearly. May it be so, may it be so. Amen.