

“What is Your Name?”
Luke 8:26-39
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Names are pretty important things. They are an intrinsic part of our identity. Parents spend hours pouring over books of names for babies, trying to find the one that will perfectly fit the baby and start them out well on the path to kindergarten. We get upset when someone forgets or mangles our name. I cannot begin to tell you how many different ways people have come up with to spell Stacey. When I was in grade school, it used to bother me when someone would leave out that ‘e,’ because I thought that the ‘e’ was crucial to keep me from being lumped in with the girls. “The guy’s spelling has an ‘e,’ ” I would always fiercely explain when some poorly mannered fifth grader would taunt me about having a girl’s name. As it was, I ended up in the girl’s bowling league one year. But hey, I had the best average in the league that year! Names are a sensitive issue because they are a primary source of identity.

And identity is a big issue in our culture, when an ever-expanding digitization is taking place and, for all intents and purposes, we aren’t much more than a collection of ones and zeros. Big brother and big business want to know everything about us, except what’s really important to us. Whether we are trying to prevent identify theft, or protect the identity of our children from online predators, who we are and what we choose to share about ourselves is taking on a higher

profile in our lives. At the same time, we don't want to be reduced to statistics and stereotypes and strategic interests. We do want to be known. That old saying, “I don't want to be just another number,” still rings true.

But it seems that this fear is not a recent phenomenon and people have always been concerned about being just another number. In our passage from Luke today, the demon-possessed man gives his name as Legion, a Roman military term denoting a detachment of about 6000 soldiers and an equal number of supporters. His name, as he offered it, was expressed numerically, as we read, “because many demons had entered him.” But he did not say his name was Beelzebub or any of the other names for demons we find in the Bible. No, he identified himself as Legion because he was filled with demons, so many that he could only choose a name that represented such a multitude. His name was derived from a number. Ironic, isn't it, that a man struggling for his own identity amidst a swarm of demons should choose a name like that?

This little story we read from Luke is set in the middle of a road trip by Jesus and the disciples. Luke includes this little adventure to show God's power over all the things humans can't control. As they set out across the Sea of Galilee, the famous episode of Jesus calming the waves comes first, showing his ability to tame the natural world. Then comes our passage where Jesus tames evil and demonic powers. Then Jesus heals a hemorrhaging woman and raises Jairus' daughter from the dead, demonstrating his power over sickness and death. By the end of their trip

together, Jesus has mastered some of the most intractable difficulties of the human existence: nature, evil, and death, and he does it all even on enemy turf. You see, the region across the Sea of Galilee where they landed, near Gadara, was not a Jewish area, as the pigs in the story indicate, since Jews did not eat or keep swine. And as soon as Jesus comes ashore, he is accosted by this raving lunatic, a man so out of his mind that he is running around naked, living in a cemetery, so violent that the townspeople tried to keep him in chains. Jesus hardly has a chance to get two feet on dry land before this man comes and gets in his face, screaming. Not exactly the ambassador one might expect in a foreign land.

When Jesus arrives, we are surprised to find out that the man already knows who his is, informed perhaps by the demons within him. But he seeks Jesus out rather than fleeing, and he speaks to him, recognizing him as the Son of God, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg of you, do not torment me.” And Jesus, though he probably already knew the man’s name, still asks the devastating question, “What is your name?” Yes, the man already knows Jesus’ name. And yes, Jesus probably already knew the man’s name. But Jesus, the incarnate one, went ahead and asked that intimate question, “What is your name?” to let the man speak for himself. It is so typical of Jesus to make the interpersonal contact, the touch, the word, to have conversation with so-called “unclean people” and in doing so establishing a relationship with them. Jesus speaks to all those to whom no one else will speak. Jesus listens to all with no one

to listen to them. And he does so in a most intimate way. He simply asks his name.

Now, Legion was clearly not the man's given name. I'm sure his parents didn't name him Legion or Battalion or Brigade or even Regiment. No, his name was probably Gaius or Philip or some other proper Greek name. But Legion was the name he acquired and kept and used. Legion was not quite a nickname, or an affectionate moniker; it was more like a stigma or a label or a curse. But more than that, it was how he came to identify himself. He had lost the connection with his real name, the name of his childhood, the name his mother used to call him home to the evening meal, the name his father spoke sternly when he misbehaved. All that was lost to the way he felt inside, full of demons and evil and pain. His very identity had been taken over by his torment. He could only call himself Legion at this point.

Legion is not the only one who has a name that says something about them. Many of the proper names in the Hebrew Scriptures are based on a certain meaning. Isaac means "he laughs", Jacob, means either "he supplants" or "he takes by the heel", Ishmael means "God hears". Many of our last names today are the result of our ancestors' occupations or positions in society: Farmer, Tinker, Taylor, King, or Smith. Even many of our first names have roots in specific meanings. Stacey comes from the Greek, Anastasio, which means "one who will rise again." But these names say something about what we do or how we behave, what kind of attributes we have. But Legion describes the way that man felt about himself.

Legion was a man who believed his condition, believed in his hopelessness and despair, believed that his situation was as good as it got.

Legion was indeed a pretty severe case, but I think he is by no means alone. I wonder sometimes how much we are like Legion. Perhaps we are not running around naked and screaming at people and living amongst the headstones of the local cemetery. Perhaps we don't go around naming ourselves after our problems, but I suspect that each of us has a name for ourselves based on our self-identity. It might be too hard or painful to recognize or admit but I think it is there. It may change over time. It may come and go. It may be buried under years of denial and repression and remembered only recently. But who among us hasn't been wounded by self or by others? Who hasn't suffered from lingering questions about the value of their very self? Who hasn't wondered about God's ability to love in the face of their own sin or the sin heaped upon them?

In the face of Jesus' question, "What is your name?", how would *you* answer? Legion called himself Legion because *so many* demons had entered into him. Maybe your name is "Crisis," because there is *so much* stress in your life that you run from place to place putting out fires instead of spending time doing what you enjoy but never seem to find time for.

Maybe your name is "Blues," because you are depressed *so often* and so severely that you can barely get out of bed in the morning and you break into tears at a moment's notice.

Maybe your name is “Exhausted,” because there are only *so many hours* in a day, and the demands on them far exceed your ability to squeeze even one more minute out of them.

Maybe your name is “Heartaches,” because *so many* of the plans of your youth went unfulfilled and now there is so much depending on you that you can’t just pick up and go.

Maybe your name is “Paralysis,” because there are *so many* decisions to be made that it seems your life is at a crossroads with no signs pointing the way.

Maybe your name is “Trauma,” because you experience *so much* of it everyday and no amount of explaining it or rationalizing it makes it go away.

Legion accepted his name as a way of life. He didn’t even ask Jesus to drive out the demons. In fact, he was so hopeless that he felt Jesus was playing with him, taunting him, tantalizing him with the possibility of his power over his Legion. I read this passage to say that Legion felt so unclean that the cleanliness of Jesus’ own spirit made him feel more unworthy of love and respect than before, that Jesus’ presence was a mockery of his pain, showing him what he could not even hope for. “What a sick joke,” Legion must have thought, of Jesus’ visit to his part of the world. But look what happened.

A long time ago, Jesus landed on the shore of a foreign land, saw a man in torment, began to heal him and asked him his name. Jesus does no less for us today. Jesus lands on the foreign shores of our hearts, the places most removed

from his own homeland, farthest from the presence of God. He sees us in torment, whatever our torment may be, whatever hurts or betrays or disgusts us most. He begins to heal us before we can recognize him, before we can even begin to hope, sometimes before we even know something is wrong. But we recognize Christ when he comes and we are terrified and humiliated by the holiness and presence of his healing heart in the face of our bruised one. And then he asks our name and we can but stammer, Legion, or Crisis, or Bruises, or Trauma, and then we know that he loves us.

The beginning of faith is that moment when we know that God cares enough to ask our name, to become intimate with us, to love us in spite of the condition of our heart. The healing, the driving out of demons, the passage of grief, the finding of lost time, those things are assured once we know that God knows us by our true name, “Child of God,” and forgets the name we give ourselves. The Bible witnesses to so many times when God changes the names of the faithful. Abram became Abraham and with it came the blessing of a multitude of ancestors. Jacob became Israel on the bank of the Jabbock and the history of the Hebrew people carries his name to this day. And Simon, the fisherman, became Peter, the Rock, the foundation of the early Church. Legion became the man who *had been possessed* by demons and he sits at the feet of Christ, clothed, and in his right mind.

As followers of Christ, we need to remind ourselves over and over that Christ asks us our name not just once but again and again, whenever we name ourselves and ignore the name God has given us. He is always coming to us and asking that question, “What is your name?,” as if to say, “Do not forget that your real name is Child of God.” And our faith is born or reborn every time he asks. Whether it is the first time or the latest, listen for Christ asking, “What is your name?” Amen.