

Name Calling

Comedian W.C. Fields once said, “*It’s not what you’re called, it’s what you answer to.*” And while this quote has some truth and a nice ring to it, I still have a bone to pick with it: sometimes, it IS what you’re called. What you’re called DOES matter.

I should know, because I’ve been called many things in my life: nerd, loser, space-cadet. Goodie-two-shoes. Clutz. Plus a lot of things I can’t repeat here. And I believed in many of these labels and lived into some of them. In some ways, I’m still working my way free of them, even as an adult.

In fact, one of my most vivid middle-school memories was a name-calling incident. Some background: I was taking German, and my name in that class was “Katrin,” as close as we could get in German to Cathy. One day, I was walking across the field that separated the gym from the school, when one of the meanest girls in our school, with her “popular” posse in tow, yelled, “Hey, Latrine! Katrin-Latrine!” An insult completely lacking in cleverness, to be sure, but somehow, not lacking in power.

Her friends laughed. I was sure that everyone in the school was laughing—that people all over the world were laughing, because I was no better than a toilet. Now, I can look back and laugh, too, *sort of*. But it was devastating at the time.

Positive labels can be equally delimiting, and burdensome—perhaps because we can be so quick to accept them. I know a woman who has always been the “strong one” in her family, and who came to see that label as an essential part of her identity. But when her daughter died, she found herself crumpling under the weight of her family’s (and her own) expectation that she show no weakness—that she hold it together for everyone else.

You see, names *do* matter. They matter a lot. That’s why the Bible spends so much time talking about names: giving names to babies, explaining names, listing names, and changing names. In the Bible, at least, what you’re called *does* matter. So does who calls you.

When Jacob was born, he was clutching his twin Esau’s heel, trying to beat him out of the womb. So his parents named him “Jacob,” which means “trickster” or “deceiver.” And you all know what a scoundrel he turned out to be: he tricked Esau out of his birthright, he tricked his dad out of the family blessing, and he tricked his father-in-law out of his best livestock. Jacob, it seems, knew what he was called, and lived up to it.

What Jacob *forgot* was that he was not just called a trickster. He was also called the stronger brother, the father of a great nation, the bearer of God’s covenant.

But he didn’t hear these names. He kept forgetting God’s promise, or never quite believed it, or thought that he had to make it happen all by himself. So he kept on racing and wrangling and cheating.

Then, one fateful night, it all catches up to him. He’s going to meet Esau for the first time since stealing his blessing, years ago. And, on his way, he stops for the night at a river. The next day, he’ll cross over the water (and we know how important water and water crossings are in the Bible!). On the other side, he’ll face the brother whom he wronged and who threatened

to kill him. He'll face all the pain he's caused; the relationships he's damaged; and the selfish, manipulative way he's lived.

Jacob is scared to death. So scared, in fact, that he sends his possessions and servants and even his family ahead of him. So scared that he turns, finally, to God, and remembers God's promise, and prays that God will remember it too, and will spare him, in spite of the royal mess he's made.

And then he spends the night alone. Or almost alone. In the middle of the night, in the middle of his dark night of the soul, Jacob finds himself in a long, strange wrestling match.

There's a lot of speculation about who or what Jacob is wrestling. The narrator says simply, and somewhat vaguely, that it's a "man," and then carefully avoids all other descriptors. Some commentators think it's an angel, some a demon, or a river or night spirit; some see it as Jacob's dark side. But in the end, it doesn't really matter what other people think. What matters is that Jacob understands that he has encountered and wrestled with God.

And what a wrestling match it is: all night long, they scuffle and sweat in the dirt, a blur of bodies, feeling out each other's strengths and weaknesses—and their own. Jacob perseveres—he holds on with all his might. When the wrestler sees that he isn't prevailing, he tells Jacob to let him go. But Jacob refuses. "Not without a blessing."

"What's your name?"

"Jacob," he answers. And in saying his name, he says everything: he confesses what others have called him, and what he has called himself, and how he has become what he has been called.

But God will not let this be Jacob's final name. God will not let this be the end of Jacob's story. God discerns something else in Jacob, something deeper and truer than his identity as a cheat, and blesses him with a new name, a new life, a new call, which grows out of who he already is: a "God-wrestler."

And that's how Jacob became "Israel," however many thousands of years ago. But what does this name-changing story have to do with us, today?

First, each of us has been named by God, too. And at our baptism, we are renamed "Christian," and "marked as Christ's own forever." *Forever*. And *that's* a promise.

But as we grow up, we forget the name that God calls us; we forget God's promise. We listen to other voices and the names they call us—and start to believe that *they* define us and set our destiny.

So, God calls us and reminds us, again and again and again, who we really are: "You are my beloved, my child, Christ's own forever, and nothing can separate you from my love." That's what God calls all of us. And with God's help, that's the name that we'll answer to and grow into.

Yes, with God's help. Because it's surprisingly hard to trust in God's love, and promise, and blessing—and to live into our God-given names, especially with all of the other voices calling us. That's why, in a few minutes, we'll ask God to bless **Mark, Henry, Avery, and James** with "an inquiring and discerning heart" and "courage to will and to persevere." Just like Jacob.

And that's why, second, as Jacob's descendants, we bear yet another name: "God-wrestler."

I used to believe that the Christian way was to be a way of easy trust and silent submission. But the more serious I've gotten about faith, the more I've found myself *wrestling*--with God, myself, my vocation; wrestling with suffering and unfairness and the questions they raise; wrestling through my own dark nights of the soul until they spit out their blessing.

And so I hope you hear what I hear in this story: that God invites and blesses our wrestling, our struggling and praying, our questioning and longing. And that we're invited to engage God with all we have-to persevere until we see the blessing. Even if it means getting messy or worn out or hurt. Because, the amazing thing is that God is willing to get messy and worn out, even hurt, with us—as we see both on the bank of the river Jabbok and on the cross in Golgotha.

The Episcopal Church honors this invitation with the rite of confirmation, which carves out time for us to get down and dirty and wrestle with God and the Bible and the Episcopal tradition--to wrestle with the names we've been given and the promises made at our baptism; and to decide which names we will answer to, and what it means to live into those names.

And it just so happens that this year, we'll have some 9th and 10th graders going through the confirmation process! I encourage all high schoolers to join in our classes, and to take advantage of this opportunity to learn and grow and to wrestle with your faith.

And I ask the rest of you to support and pray for these young God-wrestlers, as they'll be doing, in a visible and focused way, what we're all called to do: to hear and answer to our God-given names.

O God, you who created and named us and call us again and again, reminding us who we really are. Help us hear your call, help us trust in your promise, and help us live into our God-given names. Amen.