

RISING GENERATIONS

THE UPPER ROOM

Name Calling

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Every day our naming of the people around us gives life and takes it away.

I can still feel the impact of a highly musical friend who one day called me “musical.” No one else had ever called me “musical.” I didn’t play an instrument. I was no soloist.

What made his comment so remarkable was that I instantly felt known and loved. Why? Because I was being named in the way that always matters most: from the inside out.

The musicality of my life, as invisible and yet fundamental as it is, has to do with my soul, not with instruments. It’s about my way of being in the world, not about playing notes. The sheer, unexpected grace of being named “musical” stunned me. My friend named me in a way that noticed and appreciated something deeply true about me, even though it is usually missed.

Being rightly named means being truly known. It changes our lives.

Embedded in our works and in our actions are the names we give to and receive from others. Nods of recognition, glances of curiosity, looks of compassion, signs of paying attention—all build us up. “Hey bud,” “good job,” “I noticed,” “thank you,” and “join us” are little names that matter. When positive words and actions combine, such naming actually makes a life.

First Names

God created by naming: “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3a, NRSV) and “Let us make humankind in our image” (Genesis 1:26a, NRSV).

In turn, the first human beings were named with unflinching instinct. Adam said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23a, NRSV).

The first job God gave us was to name the creatures around us. Naming is as primary to being made in God’s image as almost anything else we might, well, name. Naming carries with it our peculiar capacity for relationship and our potential to perceive, acknowledge, and affirm personal identity and worth. “Love” names us rightly.

Yet right from the start our capacity for rightly naming included the freedom to misname. “Did God really say . . .” are words that rename God’s intent. “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” easily becomes “The woman you gave me.”

Such misnaming reveals that things have changed. When “brother” becomes a label, there’s no longer a reason to be his keeper (Genesis 4:1–16). A tower holds aspirations of a name—privileged and proud (Genesis 11:1–9). Misonaming misidentifies who we are and our relation to others. The tragic consequences are everywhere.

Misnaming

Power can be measured by our capacity to give names that stick. Middle school teaches us this, if nothing else. If we carry the wrong name given us by a powerful voice at a vulnerable moment, we can be crippled.

Every time the church gathers in worship, we gather as those bearing names not our own: “inadequate,” “rich,” “failure,” “together,” “bad parent,” “fat.” We can be deluded or oppressed by the naming and misnaming we experience and perpetrate on others.

Suffering, individually and collectively, intensifies when it’s wrongly named. Our world is wracked with injustice as we, God’s treasured creatures, misname God, misname ourselves, and misname our neighbor. This abuse of power is our undoing.

In Christ: New Names

At my church’s annual leadership retreat, I always introduce new leaders, not with a description of their activities or their work but with a more intimate and personal honoring of why I see them as treasured gifts. When I first began this practice and people came up in tears afterward to express what my comments had meant to them, it was clear that naming matters more than I could have guessed. . . . Yes, naming can give life.

Years ago in India, people in the higher castes would call dalits, or “untouchables,” derogatory names, such as “ugly,” “dung,” or “stupid,” to reinforce their inferiority. Imagine the powerful transformation when an untouchable discovered that in Jesus Christ, God came to earth as a dalit (an extraordinary shock of rightly naming God) and that God has the power to rename him or her: “chosen,” “holy,” “beloved.” *

“Behold, all things are new.” Indeed!

As Christians, ours is a vocation of naming. By God’s grace, our calling is to live into our own real names as we help others to discover theirs so that they, in turn, can live and name the people and the world around them. In this way, what has been “lost” is “found” and those who are “blind” may “see.”

When we live this way, we participate in “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before our God” (see Micah 6:8). What else is required by the One we name Lord?

Dig Deeper

Think about the names you have called others. Did they give life or take it away?

Now think about the names you have been called. In what ways have they given you life? How have they crippled you? Read Micah 4:5, Philippians 2:9–10, and 1 John 3:1–3. What are God’s names for you? for the people you don’t like? What does it mean to walk in God’s name?

* Learn more about the life of Mahatma Gandhi and about the way he chose to call people names that were blessings rather than curses.