
What's In a Name?

Genesis 2:15-20a

A Homily preached by Meghan Feldmeyer for the
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When I was a kid, we had all kinds of animals running around my house. In hindsight, I think my parents were a bit crazy. There was Rowdy, the gerbil, who I won in a first grade raffle. After that, we had a hamster named Daffodil, two lizards named Frisky and Jubby, a various parakeets, one with the exotic name Bonita...another one with the less exotic Steve. The childhood dogs of my heart were Penny and Nickel. And no, we never did get a Dime or Dollar. My parents finally had to put a stop to the menagerie on Fascination Circle!

Just about seven years ago, I was looking to get my first dog as an adult...and my heart was captured by a beagle puppy. Perhaps the cutest beagle puppy in the history of the animal kingdom, if I'm honest about it. And it was this time of year when I was seriously pondering what I would name this little guy, because I knew he'd be ready to come home in late October or early November. And oh my...the energy and thought that went into this naming! I pondered it in my heart all the time, as if I were naming a child! I was on baby name websites, and I routinely tested out different names on family and friends. After much searching, I settled on the name Moke (mo-kee), which is Hawaiian for Moses. This felt meaningful because the people who had raised Moke got into beagling in Hawaii...so it was a small nod to that heritage, but it also was a nod to my own biblical interests. Plus, it just had a ring to it! Moke. It seemed to fit the tiny beagle puppy with his big, pleading eyes and penchant for mischief. And although I brought Moke home on All Saints' Day and although he was named after the great prophet Moses...Moke's life is mostly characterized by troublemaking and recalcitrance rather than saintliness or obedience.

I wonder what stories each of you have about how your pet got its name. Was it just a name you liked? Did your pet come already named? Did you also do internet searches on the meaning of names? I think there is something important about names and naming. Naming is an important thing in the Bible. Biblical names are often explained...Ishamael means "God hears," Isaac means "He laughs," Jacob means "one who strives or wrestles." If you remember when Moses encounters the burning bush in Exodus, God calls out to Moses by name "Moses, Moses!"...and later Moses asks God, "What is *your name*?" I could go on and on! Sometimes biblical patriarchs are re-named to signify that God is doing a new thing...in Genesis Abram and Sarai are renamed Abraham and Sarah...in the New Testament Saul, a persecutor of Christians, becomes Paul, a most passionate disciple of Jesus who brought the Christian gospel throughout much of the ancient world.

Isaiah 43:1 reveals God's voice saying, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; *I have called you by name*, you are mine." In the gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus tells a parable of the Good Shepherd. Scripture tells us that this shepherd knows each of his sheep by name, and that he leads these sheep to safety. This good shepherd will lay down his life for these sheep. *He knows them by name*. They are dear to him.

All this to say that naming matters. Naming imparts a sense of dignity...of friendship...of respect. This is why we feel uncomfortable when women are left unnamed in the Bible, or when slaves weren't given names, or when people in work camps were stripped of their names and are assigned numbers instead. All of those things serve to devalue and depersonalize. Giving someone or something a name allows you to feel kinship with it. Children will even name their stuffed animals, and it is the naming that can help make them feel so very real, in a Velveteen rabbit kind of way. In many ways, to be named is to be loved...or to be identified as the object of love. If you grew up on a farm, you may have learned to never name the farm animals, because naming creates a *bond*...naming opens you to loving.

That is part of why I am drawn to this passage from Genesis which describes God as the one who forms and crafts each of animals...and then brings them to Adam for naming. This may reveal how God envisioned the relationship between humans and animals...as one of companionship and respect, not enmity or subjugation. If you remember, the whole reason God starts to create animals in *this* creation account is to make a partner for Adam. None of them quite fit the bill in the way that Eve does, but I still think it is important to hear the intention...animals were crafted to be companions...to be loved, and nurtured, and cherished. And that is why so many of us are here today with our beloved animal friends...because the created intention succeeded at some level. We feel a great deal of love and affection for the various pets gathered here today.

I wonder what can we learn from the various biblical accounts around naming? What do we learn about God? What do we learn about ourselves? Most of us pour a great deal of love into our pets...we name them, we nurture them, we walk, play, train, and feed them. We know their quirks and love their silliness. They make us laugh. They try our patience. Sometimes they drive us crazy. We worry when they are sick...and our hearts feel like they may well break if they run away, or go missing, or near their final days.

I wonder if in our love for our pets, God gives us a small glimpse into what it is like for God to love us?

It is a sacred gift to give love and to be loved by a pet. It is a sacred gift to call them by name and welcome them into our lives. And part of why it is sacred is that it points to the Good Shepherd, *who knows each one of us by name*...who nurtures and feeds us, who knows *our* quirks and foibles, who has unending patience, who laughs in delight at us, and who weeps at our suffering. We remember the Good Shepherd who desires *our companionship*, who searches after us diligently if we go missing, and who calls us home.

It is a sacred gift to love and be loved by a pet...but it is sacred because it points to a deeper reality...the reality of loving and being loved by *God*. The God who knows us, and loves us, and calls us by name. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; *I have called you by name*, you are mine." Amen.