

## Naming Our Children

John 6: 1-14

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 31) 2011

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One of the things I asked Lindsey and Anthony this morning was “What name have you given this child?” And they answered, “Mason Anthony Staudt.” It is traditional in baby dedications, and infant baptisms in other traditions, to ask about the name. Names are important. Names tell us who we are and who we are to become. Names tell us how to interpret the world around us.

For example, it makes a difference if we name a plant “flower,” “weed,” or “fruit.” It makes a difference if we name a child, “Bookworm,” or “athlete;” “Sweetheart,” or “Dummy.”

It is fairly common for people to respond to babies, especially little girls, by telling them how beautiful they are. I made a conscious effort to tell our infant daughters how smart they were. I read an article a couple of years ago that talked about telling small children how hard workers they are because if they only think they’re smart and they run into an intractable problem – as they inevitably will – they won’t know what to do if they can’t solve it rather easily. But if they’ve been told, if they’ve been named that they’re hard workers, then they’ll learn that when they run up against the difficult problem that they need to buckle-down and work through it, no matter how hard or how much time it will take.

Naming makes a difference. Naming has to do with narrating the world around us. To narrate means to tell a story, as in, “This is who you are and this is

how you fit into this world.” To use another term, naming frames us. It gives us a way to interpret who we are and what the world is.

In the Bible, naming is very important. Names were not simply labels; they were who the person was to become or they told a story of a place. So Eden, as in the Garden of Eden, means a place of joy and delight. Adam means earth or soil and Eve means “to bring life.” Abraham is “father of multitudes” and Sarah is “mother of multitudes.” Jesus means “savior” or “he shall save my people.” Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua. Beth is the Hebrew for house, so you get towns named Bethlehem – house of bread, or Bethesda – house of mercy. Names tell a story.

For our Gospel lesson today, we have this very well-known story from John 6. A large crowd has gathered around Jesus and the disciples. John tells us that there were about 5,000 people strung out along the hillside. Mark and Luke say it was 5,000 men, while Matthew says it was 5,000 men, besides the women and children. The day grew late and the people were getting hungry and Jesus said, “How are we going to feed this many people?” The disciples don’t have enough money to purchase the food; Philip says, “It would cost 6 months wages to feed all these people.” But Andrew comes forward with a little boy, “Here’s a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many?”

So Jesus has everyone sit down and he takes the loaves, gives thanks, breaks the bread, and shares with the crowd. After everyone had plenty to eat, Jesus has the disciples gather the leftovers and they ended up with twelve basketfuls of food beyond what was eaten by the large crowd.

There is so much in this well-known story. But for us this morning, let’s focus on this boy. Who named the world for this little boy? Who narrated that the

world was a good place, that people were not evil or suspect, and that sharing your food with others was a good thing? Someone had to name the world for this child. Someone told him stories that were good, loving, hopeful, and full of mercy. Someone named him in such a way, that when it was time, he came to Jesus with what he had.

I don't know. Someone, and it is likely to have been the significant adults in his extended family, had taught him the story of their ancestors in the wilderness with Moses and how God provided for them with gifts of manna. For the Jews, the manna story is how they understood bread. It was how they named bread. And what Jesus is doing with this crowd of people out in the wilderness is right out of this same narrative, and every Jew knew it. For the Jew, daily bread was a gift from God, and if it is a gift, then it is not to be hoarded or controlled but is to be shared. And this little boy knew this story. It was how he named bread and how he named the world. The manna story is about grace in the wilderness and that's how the boy framed himself and his lunch in the wilderness with Jesus.

But someone had also taught him that little boys and little girls, little people, and little churches can make a big difference. Someone had told him the stories of the widow of Zarephath, who though she was poor, gave what little she had to the prophet Elijah. As a result her little oil and meal that she gave away, was continually replenished so she and everyone else had plenty. This boy knew this story. It framed how he saw the world.

He knew that God used Gideon to defeat their enemies with a very small band of dedicated soldiers and no weapon other than blowing a ram's horn in the middle of the night and a lighted torch. David defeated Goliath with a little slingshot and a stone from the creek bed.

I could go on but you get the picture. These stories are how this boy named the world he lived in and someone, some community, some extended family had given him this way of framing his life.

Names make a difference.

In Washington right now, two different ways of framing what government does is in stalemate. Walk down the street here in Nacogdoches and you'll run into any number of people who name the world as a fearful place where we are threatened by enemies and where people are out to get what we have. For so many people, the narrative they know and through which they see the world is one where they are autonomous and owe nothing to anyone else. Or for some the world is one to avoid as much as possible – don't get involved; don't try to make a difference. We can't do anything anyway. We're too little. Or maybe the story they know is whatever bad has happened is always someone else's fault. I'm not responsible; I'm a victim. These ways of framing the world comes from the names and stories they've seen and heard all their lives.

Here at Austin Heights, is church a good and loving and fun place for children? What comes to their minds when they hear the word "church" or "Austin Heights?" As they grow up, what will come to their minds when they hear the names "God" and "Jesus?"

This past week, we had six children at camp where they learned stories of how to frame the world, including this one of the little boy bringing his lunch to Jesus. We've had these children since they were very young and like all children, they hear competing names and stories. They have names written on the front of their t-shirts telling them that their identity is the product they buy. Or it's the team they support. Or their stories are in the songs they hear, the games they play,

and the shows they watch – that’s how they frame the world. I’m not suggesting that we try to segregate our children from all these other stories. That’s impossible anyway. But I am suggesting they need bigger and stronger stories that will help them interpret all these others. They need our stories of Jesus, of love and mercy, grace and patience to frame all the rest they will hear. And they need teachers and adult friends who embody that same love and mercy, grace and patience to them as they learn their names from you.

Names are important. How will we name Mason Anthony Staudt? And Benjamin King and Clark Perry – the three baby boys we’ve dedicated in the last two months. What stories will these boys learn from us?

The women’s singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, has a song called “No Mirrors in My Nana’s House.” One of the singers explained how this song was created. One of her friends was telling her about growing up in a very poor neighborhood, and she grew up in her grandmother’s house and she said, “You know, in my nana’s house there were no mirrors.”

Her friend asked her, “Well, how did you know what you looked like?”

“Well,” she said, “my nana told me. Every morning I would get up and get dressed and comb my hair, and then I would go to nana and I would say, ‘How do I look?’ And she would tell me. She would tell me I was beautiful. She said my skin was smooth and golden brown, kissed by the sun, and she said my eyes shone like silver moonbeams. In my nana’s house, there were no mirrors, so I saw myself through my nana’s eyes who loved me and the beauty of everything was in her eyes.”

Names are important. Amen and amen.