

Naming Our Children

John 6:1-14

Third Sunday of Lent, (March 20) 2022

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One of the things I asked Rachel and Eric this morning was “What name have you given this child?” And they answered, “Valentina Rae Cline.” Earlier this week I exchanged emails with Eric and Rachel about Valentina’s name and Eric wrote back:

*We chose Valentina partly because we just like the sound of it, and partly because of the meaning. It comes from the Latin word Valens, meaning strong or healthy. Valentina is the female diminutive form, so we think of her as our “**little strong one.**” The significance of this to us around the time of her birth was that she was way too small for her age during the pregnancy, and ultimately needed to be delivered 3 weeks early because of how small she was. We didn’t know before the birth if she would be healthy, because babies that are too small for their age sometimes have problems that aren’t apparent until they come out. So the name choice reflected our gratitude that she was small, but nevertheless strong and healthy.*

Rae is a diminutive of the name Rachel. I suggested Rey like the character from Star Wars, because I admire that strong female character, and because I thought it flowed well coming after the name Valentina. After talking it over, we changed it to Rae because of the connection to Rachel’s name.

Valentina Rae Cline's name is important. Her name already tells a story.

It is traditional in baby dedications and infant baptisms, to ask about the name. 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 few 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 is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua and means

“savior” or “he shall save my people.” 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. 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? Who named the world and named the God, who always gives us enough to we share? 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.

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 protected 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 – strong little ones – 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. They had taught him these stories. They had named him.

Names make a difference.

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, by difference, 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.

Joanna Macy said that we name the world these days in three primary ways and they all three overlap in various ways in our lives. First, there is "*business as usual*" meaning that we keep on doing what we're doing and that individuals are separate, disconnected, and on our own, therefore we are in competition. Second, she said, we name the world as "*the great unraveling*" where everything is falling apart, climate change, racism, nationalism, and authoritarianism are all connected and all on the rise, and our response is fear and despair. But she said in this same world there is another naming: "*the great turning,*" where we deepen our roots and learn to live in relationship with one another and with creation, building and nurturing community and learning to trust and rely upon one another. Where we recognize difference, and honor it, seek to learn from it, rather than being threatened by it. Where we look for and participate in the great change God is working in the midst of the chaos and unraveling (*Active Hope*, p. 13-34).

A major challenge for us is learning to walk in these spaces of fear and insecurity – with our children – and naming it as hallowed spaces of unknowing, listening and learning together.

Lydia Wylie-Kellerman says that we need to take our children to protests. She says, “Protests are one of those places where we reach out for another’s hand and realize we aren’t alone” (from *Sojourners*, “Dancing in the Dragon’s Jaw,” p. 24, March 2022). In another essay she says we raise our children where diapers and demonstrations, prom dresses and protests all intersect in the ordinary and extraordinary work of believing in a just world. (from *The Sandbox Revolution: Raising Kids for a Just World*, p. xvii).

When it comes to time, how do we name it with our children? Is it chronos time, where one minute rushes into the next and then the next and we never have enough? Or are we living in kairos time, sacred time, where every minute is chock full of the sacred and holy? If this is kairos time – and I think it is – then it will mean resistance to our cultural chronos time where we don’t have enough, and where our narrative is all about time overload. Kairos time means we spend, even squander time with children, often just being with them, and not always doing.

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?”

Here in this community in Christ, called Austin Heights, our children learn these sacred stories including this one of the little boy bringing his lunch to Jesus. Our children, like all children, hear competing names and stories. Some 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.

Many of you will remember that 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.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.