

Holy Name
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I attended seminary right before a massive sea change in theological education. When I applied, in 1999, nearly every professor I had was of a generation that I would call orthodox—meaning that they were in large agreement about what a pastor ought to know, ought to read, ought to teach, and ought to preach. Now, of course, when we teach, we recognize that context and voice and history all are part of our lives together in the church. But when I was studying over twenty years ago, it was still pretty well understood that there was one way to be a Christian and one way to be a pastor.

And, so, I can still remember my preaching professor—who was sort of a jerk and is now a bishop—telling us over and over again that if you are not preaching faithfully to the text of the gospel story, then you are not giving a sermon. You might be giving an opinion or a poem or an essay—but it's not a sermon if it's not about the gospel.

And I think that I agree for the most part. What is more important to hear about, after all, than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? I also am thinking maybe there is more to it. What if there are other things that a Christian community wants or even needs to talk about on a Sunday morning? I see so much change happening in our parish right now, and I think that can bring with it some understandable worry. And maybe we can use these sermon times to take a few minutes to reflect on how we're doing as a community. And so I'm going to do a little experiment these next couple of months from the pulpit and try to speak a bit to what I see and hear in our parish, in our community, and in the wider church—and then try to relate it to some of the readings for the day, even if that ends up looking like a sermon my teachers would never have recognized. So, I hope that you'll come along with me as I try to name out loud some of what I see going on in our lives.

But first, the story. Mary and Joseph take their baby to the temple eight days after he was born—just like any devout couple would have. Hindus have mundan, Christians have baptism, and Jewish people have naming and circumcision. And, you'll remember from the story, that the angel had already told Mary what the name of the boy should be. Jesus, which means Yahweh saves.

It is this act of naming that I want to focus on today. Sometimes, people come into my office, and I can tell that they are angry. Arms crossed, clipped sentences, and a certain vibe rolling off of them. And yet, maybe because of midwestern culture or Christian culture, they have a hard time naming that they are angry. And something that we can do together is to work toward saying it

out loud in the room. And the strange thing is that when someone is able to really name it, it seems to lose its power. I find the same thing with apologies. Sometimes someone sort of skirts around the apology—explaining away or defending. But, really, when she finally stops and names that she is sorry, that she has regret, the entire conversation is made better because of the honesty of the name.

And so, this Sunday, we call Holy Name Sunday, and we're referring to the moment when Jesus is given his name at the temple. But I might broaden that out a bit to say that the process of saying out loud things that are true can be liberating.

There was an article in the Economist that a parishioner sent me, and it had some astounding statistics about church attendance in the United States over the last few decades. Churchgoing really isn't what it used to be, especially in the Episcopal Church. It wouldn't be inappropriate to call worship attendance in the US in freefall. Mainline Christians are completely rewriting what it means to spiritual people and what it means to belong to a parish. I think it's important to name that and to notice something very new is coming to American Christianity and that can be a scary prospect.

I notice in our parish that we, regularly, have members from 8 months old through members in their 80s. We are one of the few intergenerational places left in our society. But, I wonder, do we really know how to be a deeply integrated, intergenerational community? Have we done the work needed to understand the needs of Christians at different points in their life? Are we listening to the wisdom of our elders? Are we making sure that our young people are in positions of real leadership? Are we looking with sober and realistic eyes about where God is calling us in this new year? That is a lot for a small church like ours to have to attend to, and I think it's important to name out loud that figuring out how to all live with one another can be anxiety producing.

And, lastly, I notice that we have grown. We have approximately doubled in size in seven years. And that means that our parish is chock filled with faithful members who don't have a long history with St. Mark's and who very likely don't have a long history with the Episcopal church. What does it mean when a church like ours experiences change on that scale in a relatively short amount of time? I think it can be destabilizing, and I think it can be sort of scary. And, on this first day of the new year, I think it's important that we also name that.

Christianity in our country is changing rapidly; our parish has as much generational diversity as it ever has, and we have also experienced rapid growth. My goodness, that is a lot of change in a short amount of time. And, not for nothing, churches are generally pretty slow to change anything, so that's a lot for a short amount of time.

I wonder if it's time to name out loud some of those things that are stressful or some of those things that scare us. I wonder if it's time to name out loud when change leads to grief about people and activities that are no longer here with us. I wonder if it's time to name that we're in a season of massive change and that can be so exciting but also kind of nerve-wracking.

So, on Holy Name Sunday, I suppose I'm inviting you to name out loud what you see in our community. God has given St. Mark's to us at this time to be the stewards of the gospel in this place and for this time. We give this place to those who come after us just as it was given to us. But we give this church to the next generation in a highly distinct largely secular culture that will require creativity and courage from us—not unlike that needed of Mary and Joseph as they dealt with the radical change that accompanied the life of Jesus.