

Calling names (10B) (Mark 3:20-25)

Name calling is the last resort of the weak.

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When we regard our opponent worthy, when the matter at hand is important, we measure our words and tame our passions. But when we regard the other as less-than, or when we know we have been bested, we go low.

Remember the names we used to hurl at one another as children? Sometimes we didn't even know what we were saying, but simply shouting the word made us feel superior. We had sing-song names for the girl we deemed boyish and the boy we deemed girlish. We tortured the classmate who had a speech impediment or a physical imperfection. We taunted the readers in the slow reading group and mocked the child who didn't have money for lunch.

I will not remind you of the specific monikers we used. They are painful to the ear, humiliating to the memory, destructive to the one at whom they were launched.

Mark records a story of childish, fear-filled name calling. Jesus' mother and siblings rush to his defense as the hometown crowds call him crazy, insane, beside himself. They wince at the disrespect from the scribes who call him Beelzebul.

As is typical of Mark's brusque, headlong style, only three chapters into his Gospel, Jesus has already bested Satan, cast out a couple of demons, cooled a fever, healed a leper, given locomotion to a person paralyzed, and reconstituted a withered hand. All this and a preaching tour that drew thousands.

What defense do the manic masses and the skeptical scribes have against such a one as Jesus? They cannot challenge his exegesis. They cannot replicate his miracles. They cannot draw his crowds. He terrifies them. So they mock him.

If anyone were paying attention, they would realize that, already, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he is unassailable. After all, if he had a weakness, an Achilles' heel, the nervous neighbors and jittery religious leaders would exploit it, dismiss him, close the book on his ministry.

But there is no weakness, no fatal flaw. They cannot dismiss him. So they call him names.

Cruel caricatures are still hurled like baseballs at the heads of those who threaten the powerful. If you want a person or issue to go away, it is often wisest just to ignore it. But when the nasty names start flying, you know something important is about to happen, someone important is about to step on stage. Instead of diminishing or defeating an opponent, name calling shines a spotlight. *Look at this! Don't look at this! We are terrified!*

The crowds and scribes who seek to diminish Jesus by pasting labels on him accomplish exactly the opposite. Jesus' fame and fan base grow daily, until the day when the weapons are drawn, the soldiers commissioned, the cross erected.

Even on the cross, he has mocking names hurled at him. But it is too late. Their name calling is silenced by a single voice at the foot of the cross. The names of those who kill Jesus are lost to history, as is the name of the soldier who speaks. Jesus' name, the name above all names, is whispered on a windy hill: "Surely, this one is God's Son!"

When we call that name, we are strong.