

## **Roll Down Justice: Naming Each Child of God**

### **Roman 8:31 - 39**

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Between the early 1500's and the mid-1800's, more than 12 million Africans were forcibly taken from their homelands to become slaves in North America, the Caribbean, and South America. Some 10 million survived the Middle Passage - the brutal journey across the Atlantic during which they were crammed into the hull of a boat, chained down, lying in their own excrement, and without adequate food or water. Those who were brought to North America arrived with their African names - names such as Gola, Zimbo, Juna, and Kofi. However, in the process of subjugation, their given names were stripped from them.

Early in the 19th century, an act of congress made participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade illegal. However, the burgeoning cotton industry created an increased need for slaves in the deep South. Thus, the domestic slave trade grew dramatically. More than 1 million people were taken from their families, loaded on ships and trains, and sold again when they arrived in ports like Montgomery and New Orleans. Each time they were sold, they received a new name - whatever name appealed to the new master. Of course, a similar story played out as white Europeans sought to subjugate the indigenous people of this country, as well.

What people with power have learned is that if you want to take away a person's identity, take away their name. If you want to show that you have power over them, that you own and dominate them, that they are nothing outside of who you say they are, don't stop at taking their given name, impose a new name on them. A foreign name. Some name that means nothing to them, has no history or meaning for them, no connection to who they really are.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent - the six-week season of the church year during which we recommit to our faith in anticipation of Easter. Traditionally, Lent was a time when new converts learned about Jesus and his teachings, acknowledged whatever sins might be standing between themselves and God, and prepared to start a new life in Christ when they were baptized on Easter morning. In modern times, we continue to use Lent as a time of reflecting on our own lives. We name our mistakes and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt, thereby reconciling ourselves with each other and with God. Lent is a time for brutal honesty with ourselves, a time to see what we would rather be blind to and to speak truths we do not want to face.

This year, our Lenten sermon series is entitled "Roll Down Justice" based on the passage from Amos that Carole read at the start of the service. You may recognize the words "*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*" from Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. While the words are familiar, many don't know the context in which Amos wrote them. You see, Amos was a prophet whom God sent to the people of Israel to point out to them that they had strayed from God's ways. They had become selfish, preoccupied with wealth and war. They had begun to oppress others, to ignore the needs of the poor, to focus on their own desires and not on love and justice. God sent Amos to call them back, back into behaving like God's people, and to warn that those who didn't come back, would suffer, because ultimately, justice will roll down

like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Ultimately, in the kingdom of God, justice prevails.

Much like Amos called the people of Israel and Judah back to God's values and priorities, Lent calls us back, as well. Lent gives us an opportunity to consider how we have strayed away from God. So, we will use this sermon series to explore how we participate in injustice and repent of our apathy, our indifference, or our collusion. We will consider what it means to apologize meaningfully and to forgive sincerely. And we will claim the gifts and resources God has given to us to create change. Today, we begin by naming and celebrating that each person, each individual born into this world no matter what they look like, who they love, the pronouns they use, their disabilities, or the amount of money or education they have, each person is a beloved child of God.

As Christians, we embrace this truth through the sacrament of baptism. In contrast to the cruelty of stripping away a person's name, baptism is a ritual of naming that is a true celebration of an individual's sacred worth. During a baptism, we ask what a person's name is and repeat that name boldly as water is placed on their head and God claims them as God's own. Just as God spoke when Jesus was baptized saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased", God says the same about each of us.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As Christ-followers and as the church, we strive to be people who will not allow anything to separate others from the love of God expressed through us. To do that, we have to examine ourselves to identify what might stand between us and loving another. We each have stereotypes and assumptions that we make about the people we see or interact with day to day. We have stories we've been told, biases we've been taught, which influence our gut responses, our immediate emotions, when we see those who are different from ourselves. As Christ-followers, our task is to recognize those and seek to overcome them so we can create a community in which every person feels loved and accepted for the person they are. One way to do this is to see the other's humanity, to say their name, and to consciously remember that each person is a child of God. Yet, to do that takes intentionality and practice.

So, let's practice this a little bit right now. I am going to tell you a few stories of real people and real events. Their stories may make you uncomfortable or angry or defensive. I will share each person's name with you and when I finish telling you about them, I invite you to say their name with me, followed by the phrase "You are a child of God".

Aaron Taylor. Aaron was a homeless ex-con who lived on the streets of Phoenix, Arizona. One Christmas morning, his body was found on a bench outside of a local Subway restaurant. He had been burned to death. Authorities suspected three young men from the neighborhood who were seen throwing burning matches into Aaron's beard but couldn't prove the men were guilty. Will you join me in saying...Aaron Taylor, you are a child of God.

Sarah is a transgender, 17-year-old runaway. Her parents were angry and embarrassed by Sarah's gender identity, and the family often argued about it. Finally, Sarah ran away as it was too painful to continuously be rejected by her family. Sarah, you are a child of God.

Alonzo Bagley - Alonzo was yet another unarmed Black man shot by a white police officer in an incident in Baton Rouge earlier this month. His name has not made national news headlines. Yet, his life was as valuable as all his black brothers who have died before him. Alonzo Bagley, you are a child of God.

Anonymous - Anonymous is an Illinois high school student with disabilities who was harassed and shoved to the ground in the boy's bathroom while other students watched and laughed. Anonymous, you are a child of God.

There are, of course, so many others. So many people who are bullied, ridiculed, beaten, or killed simply for being who they are. As the church, we have the opportunity to be a safe place, a loving place, for all of them. To do that, we have to start with ourselves.

At the end of each of these Lenten sermons, I am going to share something you might do in the coming week to move from introspection into action. So, here is my suggestion for you this week. Set aside a period of time when you are going to be out and about to pay careful attention to your inner monologue. For me, the perfect time to do this will be while I'm driving because I know all of my unspoken biases come out when I encounter other drivers. As you do this, what are you thinking about the people you see? What judgments are you making? How do you feel? Is there someone in particular who brings out a reaction in you? As soon as you recognize you are feeling judgmental or scared or uncomfortable, imagine looking that person directly in the eye and saying, "You are a beloved child of God". Let the words soften your heart and lead you away from judgment and into compassion.

May it be so. Amen.