

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 5, 2017
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Isaiah 58:1-12

For Reflection

“Affirmations are our mental vitamins, providing the supplementary positive thoughts we need to balance the barrage of negative events and thoughts we experience daily.”

— Tia Walker, The Inspired Caregiver: Finding Joy While Caring for Those You Love

“Life likes to be taken by the lapel and told, “I’m with you kid. Let’s go!”

Maya Angelou, American Poet, Author (1928-2014)

Name Calling

My preaching teacher in seminary warned us to “never preach a sermon that YOU don’t need to hear.” Although this is a reflection, it is certainly something I need to hear. And that is because I am a habitual name-caller.

I come by it honestly. My birth family was steeped in negative humor – making each other the butt of our jokes – mitigated only by the occasional self-deprecating remark. My maternal grandfather was a pro at this – to the extent that he could be downright mean. One of the last times we visited him in Upstate New York – we arrived to find him on the front porch and as we approached he said to my mother, with a patronizing smile on his face, “You’ve lost weight! You’ve lost everything that’s beautiful about you.” That’s when I realized where we all got it from; genetic or environmental – it’s a family trait.

My siblings and I were also pros at calling each other names – usually focused on physical traits. We knew every synonym for “pig” – piggy, oinker, porketta, pigbutt – and most of the skinny jokes – “You’re so skinny you have to jump around in the shower to get wet.” “Carpenter’s dream – flat as a board.” “Turn sideways, stick out your tongue, you look like a zipper.” Hurting each other with words was just part of our family culture and we were pretty good at dishing it out.

It was a different ballgame when we became the targets of name-calling at school or out in the world. I loved the Hippie culture of the ‘60’s, bemoaned the fact I was too young to go live in Haight Ashbury or go to Woodstock – and, as much as possible, emulated my counter-cultural role models in dress and value system – in my own junior high way. I still remember my nemesis, Pam Flint, in her unkind tone of voice calling

out across the blacktop, “Hi Hippie!” – as if I were the scum of the earth. It was an attack on my belief system – and that hurt in a completely different way.

And then there were the neighbors who resented the fact that we had moved into a white neighborhood in 1965 Orange County with a black child – our almost adopted brother. We were forbidden to answer the phone after a few weeks of being met with threats on our lives and lots of “N-Word” epithets – “Nigger Lover” being the most prevalent. This was name-calling that destroyed any sense of safety or security, caused us to be suspicious of our neighbors and walk differently in the world.

It wasn’t until high school, even college years, that I ran into gender rendering words like “bitch” – and the “C-word” that I have difficulty even repeating. I was never called “Wet-Back” or “Kike.” But I WAS called a “Lesbian” – spoken like a weapon – and I came close to losing my job as Associate Minister in a church as an honorary Lesbian. Some names can be worn like badges and that was one I was proud to wear – until it became necessary to take it off for educational purposes.

Recognizing the pain involved in name-calling – even in jest – I learned to couch my habit in foreign terms. I learned how to cuss in sign-language. When two boys repeatedly harassed me on the way home from school, I had Dad teach me some words in Russian that I could hurl at them – which confused them and defused the situation. And I fell in love with Shakespeare – using his language when necessary.

“Thou sot, thou fragment.

Thou art a general offense and every man should beat thee!”

But there is no humorous defense against racism or misogyny. And I continually find myself falling back into the habit of demonizing people who live with what I perceive to be a toxic value system. I can hardly speak about our current president, his cabinet and our ruling party without using words like idiot, pig, Nazi, Voldemort, and a variety of “F-words” and phrases.

Being a minister I, of course, must justify my behavior by finding biblical precedent – and there’s plenty of name-calling in our scriptures, even on the lips of Jesus. “Brood of Vipers” comes to mind – as does, “Get thee behind me, Satan!” G-d is pretty judgmental at times – dissing people for their lack of hospitality, hypocrisy, unjust laws, financial misconduct, mistreatment of foreigners, refugees, widows, orphans and the poor. And I have to remind myself that scripture was written by humans who like to project human characteristics on deities – justifying our own impulse for revenge and power and a sense of superior values and moral high ground.

But this week the text brought me up short. It starts out with judgment:

3...Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

But it moves directly to affirmation:

9...If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

“...then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ...you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail ...**you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.**”

This is divine name-calling of a different order. This is using language to affirm preferred behavior – basic parenting wisdom. These words lift people up rather than tear them down. This is the kind of name-calling rarely found in the comment sections of articles or blogs – but sorely needed – especially now.

It is interesting to note that the exponential rise in telephone calls to elected officials tends to be highest when we are against something but more rare when we want to affirm something. Starbucks stood up against the refugee ban and pledged to hire 10,000 refugees over the next five years. They’ve gotten way more negative calls than supportive – something we can address so easily.

And it is important to remember that it takes ten times the number of positives to counterbalance a negative word or experience. If we are ever going to crawl back to civility and a rational society, it behooves us / me / us to channel our horror and anger into positive words and actions – focus on supporting victims rather than cussing out the perpetrators – disarm the perpetrators without beheading them.

Saturday Night Live has a wonderful way of skewering people – not by name-calling – but by mirroring ridiculous behavior in ways that make us laugh – at others but also at ourselves. We need to find ways to affirm the people who are doing the right things – and curb the bad behavior through legal, compassionate, humorous, persistent, healthy channels.

And we need to practice this constantly. At dinner with a friend last night I had to stop myself repeatedly before using a terrible word to describe a public figure. There were children at the next table. I needed to show self-restraint. But I was also aware that I was reflecting on this this morning – and I needed to begin practicing what I was preaching – or not preaching – whatever.

So let's come up with some ways in which we can focus on affirming positive behavior and staving off bad behavior without personal assault.

- I mentioned one: calling Starbucks and other companies that practice compassion.
- There are some Super Bowl Ads that are doing just that – we need to pay attention to who is marketing our value system and patronize them – affirm and support them.

What else?

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May your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.
May you be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail
May you be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58:1-12

1 Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. 3 "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. 4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.