

What Did You Call Me? 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Those of us who have uttered those words to someone in anger know firsthand the immense harm the human tongue is capable of inflicting. Even though many of us have been taught from a young age to respond to such assaults with the old adage that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" the problem is we know firsthand that it is not true. Names can hurt us, especially when it is a name that makes fun of a certain physical trait or perhaps even a certain character flaw that we are not especially fond of. Whether it is from a schoolyard bully or a parent or grandparent lacking the necessary skills and patience required for raising children derogatory names uttered in haste or anger can damage a child for life.

I almost hate to admit it but one of my favorite parts of the movie "the Christmas Story is when Ralphie finally has enough and strikes back at the schoolyard bullies for picking on him. As many fans of certain sports teams well know it is part of our human nature to root for the underdog. We all want things to be fair, and when they are not, we want to do something about it. For example, several years ago salary caps were instituted in professional sports in an attempt to bring parity or as some critics would say mediocrity to the league. It didn't seem right that a billionaire team owner with deep pockets could secure the best talent in the league simply because he or she had more money than another team owner. Salary caps coupled with subtle changes in the rules over the years have now made it possible and even routine for a team with a losing record to secure a playoff spot on the field while other teams with winning records have to watch the game from the comfort of their huge homes. That doesn't sound fair but that is the way it works. The fact is that no matter how the rules are changed, there will always be winners and losers. Try as we may, it is not possible to achieve equity and perfect fairness in the world. Sin always gets in the way.

That is true both in sports and with life in general, but the good news is that it is not that way with God. As St. Luke puts it in Acts 10:34, God shows no partiality. A few verses later in 10:43 he reminds us why that news is so good! Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name. It is often said that the foot of the cross is found on level ground, equally approachable from all directions. To use a football analogy Jesus levelled the playing field and made it fair for everyone who wants to play regardless of money, skill, talent, gender, skin color or ethnic background. So, in that sense we can choose to be forgiven, and it doesn't get any fairer than that.

St. Paul reminds us of that truth in his letter to the church at Corinth. He says we are in fact **called** to be forgiven saints in Christ. How would your life change if every time someone called you by name, they would use the qualifier "saint" first? We are called to be sanctified, which means to be set apart and made holy, we are called into the fellowship of God's Son Jesus, we are called to be in fellowship with other saints in the church and we are called to be guiltless in the day of our Lord. To paraphrase Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it will truly be a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of our character. Consider the implications. How would this world change if there were more saints than sinners in it?

The ironic thing is that the church of Corinth was not filled with saints. Corinth was a city in Greece, and much like the cities of today it was a heathen city with a diverse mixture of pagan culture, history, philosophy, and blatant sexual immorality. Calling someone a Corinthian was anything but a compliment. By all indications in Paul's letters, the church at Corinth looked little different than the city of Corinth. We see in chapter 5 that it was sexually immoral, greedy, corrupt, idolatrous, and divided. Like some churches today, they were reflecting and glorifying the things of the world instead of reflecting and glorifying the things of God. That is never a good thing. Even so, Paul's love and concern for them remained deep and he wrote to remind them of who they are and of their calling in Christ. He knew they could do better. In Christ, they had everything they needed to be called saints.

Though the letter was first delivered to them, Paul also wrote it with you and I in mind. Note how he addresses it in verse 2 to those who are sanctified or set apart from sin and made holy in Christ and called to be saints. That includes those in the early church at Corinth as well as those who call upon the name of Jesus at Millcreek.

Though we might say we belong to Millcreek, what would change if we began to believe that we belong to Christ's church where we are all called, or chosen to be saints- recipients of God's grace and peace? It's a big responsibility, and one filled with enormous possibility because those that God calls to be saints God also equips to do God's work. Paul lists three of those specific gifts we have through Christ in verse 5&6. They include speech, knowledge, and testimony. These are spiritual gifts- things that we all receive by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit and not by merit or effort of our own. As with all good and perfect things God gives us, we are to nurture them, enjoy them and share them with others so that God might be magnified and glorified. Let's explore them together.

Speech is our ability to communicate our thoughts, our ideas, our excitement, and our love for Jesus with others. All of us have the gift of communication, whether through verbal or written word. Some of us do that through phone calls or letters and cards or striking up a conversation with folks we have not seen or met before. I challenge you this week to use your own gift of speech to begin a conversation with someone new. It could be someone in the line at the store in front of you, someone in the workplace, or someone you encounter in a social setting.

Today we have become better at avoiding eye contact with strangers than we are at communicating with them. Acknowledging someone we don't know might be difficult for some of us, and it might even stretch our social skills a bit. The old cliché is it will get you out of your comfort zone. But once you get used to acknowledging others rather than pretending you don't see them it will get easier to do. Not everyone will respond, but often times you will be blessed when they do. You might even be amazed at how often the person you are talking to is someone else called by God to demonstrate the love of Christ. **Saints have a desire to know other saints.**

Knowledge is another gift we have all been given. This knowledge is not the kind we receive at a school or university that results in a diploma or degree. Rather it is the kind of knowledge that begins in our mind but is processed and developed in our heart. Looking at the glory of creation, our minds tell us that there must be a higher power that is responsible. Being creatures of reason, we know that such glory and splendor could not come about by accident. That knowledge gives us the desire to know more about that power and our purpose for being placed here. It also gives us the ability to know right from wrong, to recognize sin, and to seek forgiveness and restoration. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God gives us the knowledge that we are both loved and forgiven, and that God wants us to know Him and relate to Him- in other words have a personal relationship with Him- through His Son Jesus Christ. **Saints know they are forgiven in Jesus.**

The last gift Paul describes as the testimony of Christ. It is not easy to illustrate but it is the result of that life altering moment when the Gospel we have heard with our ears, processed in our minds, and developed in our heart finally comes together and we know- in spite of the ugly names the devil throws at us- that we are loved and forgiven and called to be one of God's saints. **Saints tell others about Jesus.**

Speech, knowledge, and testimony are divine gifts of the saints, gifts that God intends for us to share with others. Let us use those gifts to unite us together for the glory of God. Amen