June 10, 2018

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
Gen 3:9-15; Ps 130:1-8; 2 Cor 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” This childhood rhyme is well known to most – and just as often misunderstood. Broken bones can heal, but many people, especially children, do not get over being called spiteful names. Names like ‘dummy,’ ‘fatso,’ or ‘faggot’ are an affront to another’s basic human value. Perhaps we should change the saying to: “Sticks and stones can only break my bones, but names can cut me to the quick.’

Why do we resort to name calling? It is a frequent ploy of bullies, mean spirited people, or those with an inferiority complex. Sometimes it is a way of imposing our own self-importance; we think we are better than the other. Such name calling is an attempt to humiliate or marginalize. Or it might be a way of hiding a lack of self-importance; we feel inferior and we think that maligning another will cut them down to our size or raise us above them. At yet other times, people we do not like are the objects of our scorn. Public name calling is an attempt to degrade them before others; we often call our enemies terrible names, presuming that we now have the right to hate them.

Today’s gospel reading recounts a confrontation between the scribes and Jesus. Most, if not all, of such confrontations were attempts to shame Jesus before the groups, thus minimizing his influence. In this case, the scribes are challenging the origin of Jesus’ ability to cast out demons. Why do they do this? Perhaps they are threatened by his power. If they admit that this power comes from God, they would have to explain why they do not listen to his teaching and reform their lives. So they call him names: “He has Beelzebul.” The name was probably a derivative of Baalzebub, the name of a Philistine god. However, the new name means ‘lord of the flies’ or ‘god of dung,’ and it designates the leader of the forces of evil. This name is a double insult. It implies that Jesus is aligned with filth as well as the forces of evil.

Though “meek and humble of heart,” Jesus does not let this insult pass. If he would, the people will not listen to him, and he has not yet sown adequate seeds for the growth of the reign of God. The time for his humiliation will come, but it will not come this day. And so he turns their attention to the Holy Spirit to transform the situation.

Name calling is a violation of human dignity and social justice. It slanders or defames aspects of another’s gender or sexual orientation, race or ethnic origin, religion or political stand, intelligence or physical characteristic, etc., etc., etc. Regardless of all our differences, we are all children of God. That is a name of which we can all be proud.
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