

Sermon: Calling Names

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, June 9, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I have just returned from the 149th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. This was the fourth time I have had the pleasure of participating in the highest court of the Church, and by far this was the tamest, solemn even.

Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls was elected and installed as the Moderator of the Assembly. She is a well respected professor of the Hebrew Scripture, from the Vancouver School of Theology, and from the Knox College earlier. Many in the Assembly had learned under her, including myself briefly in 2005. It is good to see Pat still reminding her former pupils to pay close attention to verses of the Old Testament that are repeated, conveying something important. Her wits and her sense of humour still intact.

The Assembly was introduced to Rev. Dr. Pablo Kim Sun, as the new Intercultural Liaison, a position recently created, with a five-year term, aiming to bring all cultures within the PCC to work more closely together. Pablo is of Korean descent, grew up in Paraguay and came to Canada by way of the United States. He had previously served as the Senior Leader for Anti-racism and Intercultural Conciliation with the Christian Reformed Church. He will hopefully bring to us his wealth of experience in building relationship with minority communities.

The General Assembly was reminded by the previous Moderator Rev. Mary Fontaine, in a hope-filled worship service, to reach out to Indigenous people in our neighbourhoods, to be welcoming to them, and to continue the work of healing and reconciliation. Subsequently, the Assembly adopted a renewed Apology of the PCC, for its complicity in colonization and operating residential schools. It was followed by a deeply moving smudging ceremony, led by Stewart Laughing Bear Folster, a member of the National Indigenous Ministries Council. The full text of the Apology can be downloaded from the national church's website. In time, I will share it first with the session and hopefully with the congregation at a later worship service.

There was some debate on the 2025 budget for the national church. Commissioners were rightly concerned with declining Presbyterians Sharing income and increasing expenditures for various programs. The drawdown from the restricted fund has been increasing for a number of years, to the tune of projected \$3.5 million in 2025. People were nervous as to the financial viability of the denomination, until we were reminded of this projected drawdown pales in comparison to the actual interest and investment income of \$17 million this past year. This is largely due to the accumulation of an enormous endowment fund of, if I am not mistaken, \$350 million to date. At that realization, there was a collective sigh of relief, as commissioners started to debate why we are not investing more money in congregations and programming.

All in all, the business of the Assembly was conducted largely in a cordial manner. Except for a minor hiccup from a person who has no standing in the Assembly, details of which I am not going to expand. Suffice to say no one got up to shout into the microphone, no one resorted to call others names. A far cry from the previous assemblies that I had attended or witnessed online.

Name calling is the topic under our attention today, as we read in the Scripture passage of Mark 3, where the scribes who came from Jerusalem called out Jesus by a nasty name, *“He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”*

The author of Mark has a distinctive way of telling the story of Jesus —that is action filled, brief and to the point. Only three chapters into this Gospel, Jesus has already resisted Satan’s temptation, cast out a few unclean spirits, healed a leper, cured a paralytic, and restored a withered hand. The name of Jesus has spread far and wide; everywhere he went he drew thousands, eager to hear him preach with power and authority.

The religious authority of scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law pale in comparison to Jesus. They were unable to challenge his teaching; they cannot reproduce his miracles; they could not draw the same crowd. Jesus terrifies them, so they mock him: “He has Beelzebul!”

Beelzebul, or the prince of demons, came from the Hebrew word of Ba‘al zəvuv, appearing in 2 King 1, referring to a deity worshiped by the Philistines in the city of Ekron. In that story, King Ahaziah of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had injured himself in a fall. For reason unknown, he sent messengers to inquire of Ba‘al zəvuv of Ekron, to learn if he would recover.

The name Ba'al zevuv, which literally means the Lord of Flies, might've been a derogatory pun used by the Israelites. Scholars have speculated that its original form might've be Ba'al zevul, or lord of (heavenly) dwelling—slight change in ending, big difference in meaning. In any case, for the sin of inquiring a foreign god, Prophet Elijah was sent by the Lord God, to pronounce to Ahaziah his imminent death, the following morning.

So this derogatory name of Ba'al zevuv, or Lord of Flies, stuck. By the time of Jesus, it became known in Greek as Beelzebub or Beelzebul—either one referring to Satan, or the prince of demons. That was the name by which Jesus became labelled, not by street hoodlums, but by respected scribes from Jerusalem.

Name calling is something I suspect we are all familiar with, too familiar. Even if it is not instinctual, calling other names is a behaviour that does not require much acquiring. Thinking back to our childhood, I suspect we had all done it at one time or another—hurling names against others children. We may not have understood what we were saying, but boy, did it make us feel good.

We had names for girls we deemed boyish, and boys we deemed girlish. We mocked the slow reader in a reading group, and taunted the classmate who may have a physiological impediment or a psychological imperfection. I am not going to remind you of specific terms used, for they are painful to the ears, harmful to the hearers, and humiliating to the ones on the receiving end. But suffice to say name calling is no stranger to us.

Such childish behaviour unfortunately does not stop at childhood, it carries on into adult life. When we regard our adversary as worthy, we measure our words and tame our fiery passions. But when we regard the others as less worthy, or when we know we have been bested, embarrassed, we go low. How does one stop an unwelcome message? Shoot the messenger, or course, call them names. He has Beelzebul, he is Beelzebub.

But Jesus, facing such a degrading name-calling, calmly retorted with two simple pictures. The first showing that something divided against itself cannot stand: a house, a kingdom, even Satan himself. The second, perhaps a bit opaque than the first, about the need to tie up a strong man in order to plunder his house.

Most importantly, Jesus did not resort to name-calling, he took the high road. Showing an unmatched sense of confidence, knowing that the

Spirit of God is with him, Jesus calmly reminded his adversaries, in verse 28-29,

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

The Spirit of God should not be profaned, the Spirit of God cannot be blasphemed, and the Spirit of God is with Jesus.

The scribes, the crowds and even his own family, who seek to diminish Jesus by calling him names, or by trying to restrain him accomplish exactly the opposite. The name of Jesus, his fame and fan base grow daily, until the day when the weapons are drawn, the soldiers stationed, the cross erected.

Even on the cross, he is mocked with names hurled at him, but it is of no avail. The names of those who hurl insults at Jesus lost to history, the derogatory names by which he is called faded into background, except for the soldier who speaks by the foot of the cross, on a lonely hill, proclaiming the name of Jesus, the name above all names: **“Surely, this man is the Son of God!”**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**