

Chapel Talk: 28 January 2015  
Hoversten Chapel, Augsburg College  
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“What’s in a Name?”

“You are the salt of the earth;  
but if salt has lost its taste,  
how can its saltiness be restored?  
It is no longer good for anything,  
but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world.  
A city built on a hill cannot be hid.  
No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,  
but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.  
In the same way, let your light shine before others,  
so that they may see your good works  
and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16,  
NRSV)

Just to give myself a fighting chance, on the first day of class this semester I gave everyone name tents. They were blank. On the front, in letters that could be read from way across the room, I asked people to write the name they’d like to be called by in my class.

Then, on the inside of the name tent, I asked people to tell me who the registrar thinks they are. Sometimes the name the registrar wants to call us isn’t the name we want to be called.

My rationale: if we’re going to be together for the next sixteen weeks, the least that can happen is that we all get to be called by the names we want – not the names other people want to call us. Most people had nicknames the registrar apparently didn’t know about: “Judith” went by “Judy,” “Madelyn” by “Maddy;” there was a “Dick” instead of “Richard;” and, instead of “George,” just “G.” There were

some surprises: “Mikaela” became “Miki,” “Jeffrey” really wanted to go by “Cameron,” “Katelyn” would rather be called “Collins.”

I think about naming a lot.

Another layer of naming surfaced in a search committee. Almost to a person, applicants from other countries or applicants with hyphenated origins within this one (e.g., Thai-American, Italian-American, Russian-American, Chinese -American, Somali-American) tucked an Anglicized name in parentheses to their passport identities. “Abdi” was parenthetically “James;” “Fan Chen,” parenthetically “Fiona.” I think back to my own Cuban-Irish-German origins and my great- great-grandmother, Isabella Angela Calleja. Were she to apply for the finance position in the Augsburg Business Department, she’d probably be parenthetically just “Anne.”

The name game: Is it done for ease in interviewing? Accommodation? Expedience? Or is it just more painful to hear an Anglo mangle your given name than to be called by a name they could actually pronounce?

Like I said: I think about naming a lot.

Then there’s this, in the aftermath of the January 7<sup>th</sup> shootings in Paris at the offices of Charlie Hebdo and at a kosher grocery store in a Jewish neighborhood, hundreds of thousands of people all around the world made name tents for themselves. On the front, in bold letters that could be read from across the room, that could be read from around the world: *Je suis Charlie. Ich bin Charlie. Yo soy Charlie.* “I am Charlie.”

The most touching name tent came out from a cohort of Muslims marching on the streets of Paris. A man wearing the white cap that identifies him as a veteran of the Hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, marches next to a woman bearing a name tent that says: *Je suis Juif.* “I am a Jew.”

All of this drops into the United States of American national consciousness after we are reeling from tragic killings of our own, the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida, the killing of Eric Garner in New York. We saw

name tents on this side of the Atlantic: “I am Mike Brown.” “I am Trayvon Williams.” And, for Eric Garner, “I can’t breathe.”<sup>1</sup>

In these cases, the only name the registrar could see, the only name the cops could see, the only name George Zimmerman could see was a name tent that read:

“I am Black. I am Male. I might be armed.”

As was the case in Paris, the people responsible for these American killings also reacted out of a kind of fundamentalism: a fundamentalism of racism and economic injustice. It may seem a different kind of fundamentalism from that of the militants who marched into a journalists’ office and a kosher grocery store in Paris. But all fundamentalisms tap the same root: a rabid fear of anyone different.

So yes: I think about naming a lot.

Here’s what I’m thinking:

On one hand, I’m deeply moved by these name tents around the world, for Michael Brown, for Charlie Hebdo, for Trayvon Martin. It’s like painting a target on your front, with its center right over the heart, and saying: “Now, you have to take aim at me. At her. At all of us. There are more of us than your bullets.”

On the other hand, I’m troubled. Because I am NOT Charlie Hebdo. I don’t have the talent, the insouciance – or the judgment. That is to say: I hope I would be, as David Brooks put it, “legally tolerant, but socially discriminating.”<sup>2</sup> He’s hinting at an importance distinction between law and morality. Some things should be legal, but simply shouldn’t be done because they erode a common good. Legally tolerant, but socially discriminating.

Language from my own Christian tradition makes a similar distinction. Writing to those oh-so-savvy and preciously cosmopolitan Corinthians, Paul distinguishes between things that are legal – but may not be helpful, things that may not “build up” (1 Cor 10:23).<sup>3</sup> So I am NOT Charlie Hebdo, and I am not because I’m not sure that kind of satire builds up.

But I am also NOT Michael Brown. Or Eric Garner. Or Trayvon Martin. I am a white woman of the privileged classes of the overly educated professoriate. I don't know what it's like to be a black male in America. While I want to express solidarity with black women and men who are clearly at risk in this culture, I don't want to forget the very real differences that place that experience outside the realms of my wildest imagination and most deeply held commitments. A name tent, no matter how earnest and well-intentioned, masks those differences.

I think about naming a lot.

This morning we listened to a text from Matthew's gospel that does a lot of naming. These aren't names we claim, whether through a solidarity of identification or a solidarity of advocacy. These are names that claim us.

Let me situate this text from Matthew's gospel. It comes in the middle of the first sermon in Jesus' public ministry. This is his inaugural moment, his recruiting speech. But more importantly, Jesus himself has just been baptized; he's just been given a name that claims him, a name that "is above every name ... in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil 2:9-10, NRSV). In letters that should be legible from across the room and from all around the world, his name tent reads: "This is my Son, the Beloved One" (Matt 3:17). It's a name that claims him.

But the only name people chose to see was the name their fear assigned to Jesus. It reads differently, depending on the fundamentalism that issues the label: Jesus, the Nazarean: can anything good from Nazareth?! Jesus, a carpenter: you can almost hear the sneer. Jesus died under a name tent that hung above him on the instrument of his execution: "Jesus: King of the Jews."

But the name Jesus wants to be called is the name that claims him:  
"Jesus: The Beloved One of God."

That name, that claiming name, has repercussions for the people that follow him. It's not: "Here's your target: aim right here." Instead,

it's more subtle, and the logic runs: "If this is who I am, this is who you must be."

What does he do with this name: "Jesus: the Beloved One of God?" He uses this name to claim others. He blesses them, the most unlikely assortment of people: those who mourn, those who the poor of the world, who are meek of the world, the despairing, the children, the pure in heart (Cf., Matt 5:1-12). He blesses these people as beloved children of God, and then, he claims them with the names we read in the text today.

"You are salt.... You are light...."

If we could make our own name tents, we should write those names on them, in letters that could be easily read from way across the room, from all around the world: "I am Grace, the Beloved One;" "I am Luke: the Beloved One;" "I am Adam, the Beloved One." Or to put it in short-hand, just plain old "Salt." "Light."

You are Salt: use it to preserve, not to rub in an open wound.  
You are Light, use it to illumine, not to blind. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://s1.ibtimes.com/sites/www.ibtimes.com/files/styles/v2\\_article\\_large/public/2014/12/08/i-cant-breathe.jpg?itok=Pr\\_-6FFy](http://s1.ibtimes.com/sites/www.ibtimes.com/files/styles/v2_article_large/public/2014/12/08/i-cant-breathe.jpg?itok=Pr_-6FFy)

Accessed 1/26/15.

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, "I am not Charlie Hebdo," Op-Ed, *New York Times*, 8 January 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/09/opinion/david-brooks-i-am-not-charlie-hebdo.html>

Accessed 1/25/15.

<sup>3</sup> "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up." (1 Cor 10:23, RSV)