

January 17, 2016

TEXT: Isaiah 62:1–5

TITLE: Marriage in Beulah Land

Every so often a business will change its name. Often these changes are improvements. For example, back in 1893 a pharmacist named Caleb Bradham was experimenting with soft drink recipes when he came up with a new one he simply called “Brad’s Drink.” As the drink grew in popularity, five years later they decided it needed to be called something different so Brad’s Drink was re-named Pepsi-Cola. More recently, Sergey Brin and Larry Page invented the search engine called Google, but that wasn’t its first name. Originally the service was called BackRub. Moving from BackRub to Google was a step in the right direction, but not every name change is an improvement. The six month old merger between Heinz and Kraft has given us the new company called Kraft Heinz, which to my ears still sounds like it sells cheese ketchup.

Name changes happen a lot in the bible. If you read through all of scripture, you will run into 20 to 30 examples of one name being swapped out for a new name. Some of the most famous examples are when Abram was told by God he would be the father of many nations and henceforth be called Abraham. Or when Jacob was renamed Israel, Sarai was renamed Sarah, or in the New Testament when Simon was renamed Peter or Saul was renamed Paul. Changing a name is not something done lightly or on a whim. It marks a significant moment in a person’s life, literally the beginning of a new chapter with a new identity. It means stepping away from a past and stepping forward into a new and hopefully better future.

When I read through today’s passage from Isaiah, I noticed that verse 4 had several name changes in it—all moving from negative to positive images. The recipient of this was the city of Zion, Jerusalem, the ancient capital of the Jewish people. For long years, the Hebrews had been forced to live in exile under the control of Babylonian kings. But at last they’d been allowed to return home—to rebuild their capital and re-establish their lives in their ancestral land. No longer were they to be called “Forsaken” and a “Desolate” people. Now they would be known as those in whom God “takes delight” like a bridegroom takes delight in his bride, telling everyone that the two of them are now “married.” The whole passage is uplifting and hopeful, so I decided to look at it in more detail.

As I mentioned, one of the name changes involved shifting from Shemamah (which means Desolate) to Beulah (which means Married). This is the only time the word Beulah appears in the bible. It’s a lovely name though, and one that is very popular as a baby name for girls...if you are back in 1916. It’s an old-fashioned name, but it captures a wonderful sentiment. Imagine an ancient Israelite looking over the city of Jerusalem, long abandoned during the hard years of exile, and now saying it would again be known as God’s city, Zion, Beulah, the spouse of the Lord.

If I were a mega-church pastor on television, I’d spend my sermon time celebrating how God moves us from negative names to positive names. But is it possible to celebrate the movement from Shemamah (Desolate) to Beulah without also acknowledging the sad times that caused Jerusalem to be called Desolate in the first place? The reason the prophet told of the city being re-named into something positive was only because for so long it had been known as a place of pain and abandonment and loss. Like I said at the

beginning, not every name change can be celebrated. Sometimes the changes point to suffering and sadness.

We don't seek out negative name changes, but too often they come to us in this life unbidden. Lose a spouse and affixed to your name now is the title "widow" or "widower." Send children off to war as soldiers and you run the risk of them being killed accidentally by their own troops, linking the name "veteran" with the ugly euphemism "collateral damage." Or when a woman endures domestic violence or rape, she will still introduce herself to others by her first name, but secretly she will call herself by a second name—"she who's been abused."

People fight not to have their name changed to a lesser, negative alternative. A powerful scene in Alex Haley's epic mini-series "Roots" showed a young man named Kunta Kinte who after being sold as a slave in America, tried to escape; but he was caught and strung up with ropes to be punished. His master demanded that he be whipped until he acknowledged a new name of "Toby." As the whip snapped across his back, the master shouted, "Who are you? Say your name, Toby." To which came back a weak response "Kunta Kinte." More lashes were given until finally the young man hung his head and whispered, "My name is Toby."

As much as we want to celebrate the replacing of a negative name with a positive name, we must also remember what caused the negative name to be given in the first place. This requires us to name the desolation, the sense of being forsaken, the abuse and loss. It requires breaking our silence. That's why the words of hope in Isaiah 62 begin with a defiant proclamation: *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent; for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest until her vindication shines like the dawn or a burning torch.* Refusing not to keep silent can take many forms. After the attacks of 9/11 brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center, New York City re-built on that same spot new towers, including the even taller One World Trade Center as a witness of hope and defiance. After the attacks upon cartoonists in "Charlie Hebdo" people proclaimed "Je suis Paris" ("I am Paris"), refusing to allow Paris to be re-named a city of violence. The civil rights movement has long shouted "I am Somebody" lest racism be allowed to de-humanize anyone, or lest incidents like those involving Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or Sandra Bland ever be treated as acceptable acts of police brutality against African Americans.

Breaking the silence may involve entering a 12-Step meeting and saying your name followed by the admission "I am an alcoholic or addicted to drugs." It may mean breaking the silence by telling someone "my family member is in jail" or "I struggle with bi-polar disorder, with anorexia, or serious depression." Last year's marriage equality victory was significant because it meant America was finally breaking the silence around what constitutes a true covenant of marriage. For too long, marriage had been restricted to contrary categories—marriage as covenants of love between two people, but covenants too often culturally defined by patriarchy and male-dominance. Sadly some of this language can be traced back to the bible. Even our passage today in verse 5 talks about a young man marrying a young woman, but says nothing about a woman marrying a young man. It talks about a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride as if she someone "taken" in marriage, property now assigned to a new owner. And nothing is said here about same gender couples whose love and commitment befit a marriage covenant, but for too long they were denied that status by American society.

Scripture can only use the vocabulary building blocks it has at its disposal when it was first written. So the bible won't say anything about nuclear power or space travel or genetic predispositions shaping sexual orientation. However, the building blocks of biblical language always rest upon a deeper foundation—a foundation of love, justice, of Christ's promise to redeem us from sin and brokenness and prejudice. So even when we read about grooms "taking" brides, when the language of patriarchy tarnishes what we're trying to say about marriage, we know that the true foundation of faith breaks the silence and announces that marriage is a covenant between any two loving people and it's intended to be mutual, faithful, blessed and sustained by God. Whatever is abusive in relationships is not part of God's marriage covenant; whatever forsakes or desolates or harms is not part of "Beulah", God's land of marriage.

Sometimes a name change is done in order to recover the deeper foundation of faith and to lift up what the world would keep silent about. In the mini-series' "Roots" the whipped slave re-named Toby later had a daughter named Kizzy, who was vindictively sold away. After many years she returned home to discover her father had died. His grave was marked by a simple cross that only said "Toby." Weeping, she found a rock and she scratched out the slave name and wrote over it "Kunta Kinte."

I don't know what names you brought with you when you came to church today. I don't know whether you feel "forsaken" or whether you rejoice as one who feels "God's delight" rests upon you. I don't know what secret names you painfully carry within, or what triumphant names you are happy to celebrate. But I do know this: You are Somebody. And you leave with a new name—Christian. Like foster children adopted into loving households, you are now Forever Family. Like sinners washed clean and stepping forth into a new chapter of life, you are now Redeemed and Beloved. As people in diverse relationships, straight and gay, single or married, you are Beulah, part of God's covenant created and called Good from the foundations of time. As people known by Christ, you are now named "Christian." Do not keep silent about this good news. This is one name change worth celebrating!

AMEN.