

March 4, 2012

The Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When I was born, my parents named me “Noelle Marie.” It is a good name, I think, and it suits me. That name stuck for twenty nine years until my own first child was born when suddenly I was renamed “Eli’s mommy”. Now, in several other cultures, this is actually an expected part of the social process of becoming a mother. I, however, was *not* expecting it. There was and still is a whole swath of the population, daycare teachers, toddler friends, other parents in music class, the pediatrician’s staff, that all refer to me—to my face—as “Eli’s mommy.” After the initial breaking-in period, I’ve gotten used to it and even used to the additional moniker that comes along with the additional child: “Eli and Linden’s mommy.” Now that I’ve embraced it, it is perhaps my favorite name, connecting me indelibly to my favorite occupation, raising my kids.

What is your favorite name? We spend a lot of time being named, don’t we? In the words of anti-establishment teenagers everywhere, we are *labeled*, I guess, but I prefer, now as I get softer, to think of it as being *named*. Think for a moment about your own names, those things by which other people refer to you or which you refer to yourself. Keep it clean, we are in church, after all.

My list is long: mother, wife, sister, daughter, priest, runner, photographer, loyal friend. Those are the ways I am named, both by myself and by the folks around me. Different names rise to the top of the list as different parts of me are needed, hence “Eli’s mommy,” but I am all of those things at any given time.

What I don’t like, and I think this is part of that “labeling” backlash, is being boxed in by something that someone else wants to call me. I love being a mommy with every fiber of who I am, but I am more than that. I am more than a priest or a woman or a runner. I am more, even, than the sum of all those things. We need these names to tell each other apart, to make daily conversation a little smoother, but when we use these names to essentialize, categorize or define each other it gets uncomfortable or even dangerous.

Jesus’ rebuke to Peter is strong, angry even: “Get behind me Satan!” Peter has tried to define Jesus, to box him in according to the perception and expectation of what he believes a Messiah should say or do or be. Jesus makes it clear that he is not about to let Peter or anyone else define him. He refused to be limited by the devil in the wilderness, and he refused to be limited by Peter. The world’s notion of “Messiah”—conquering, ruling, defeating—was not part of God’s identity.

This is the first of three predictions of Jesus’ suffering, rejection, death and resurrection in the gospel of Mark. Each is followed by the disciples’ failure to

relate Jesus' self-understanding with their own perception of him. Each time, the incongruity between Jesus' teaching and what the disciples want to hear bubbles to the surface.

Jesus' rebuke to Peter is a small part of this story, not at all as significant as some of the other plot movers, but if we think of Peter and his friends as our own models of discipleship, this tiny piece of the story serves two purposes. First, it reminds us that God will not be limited by our miniscule little human definitions and that there is no box big enough to fit our God. Second, it reminds us not to let anyone else define us, to box us in or to tell us we are smaller or less powerful than we are.

You may have noticed a glaring omission in my earlier list of my own titles. Two omissions, actually: Child of God and disciple. These two inform the whole rest of my being. As a child of God and as a disciple, I make decisions on how to parent and wife, how to minister, how to be a sister and daughter and a citizen and even how to be a runner.

I am first and foremost, above all else, a child of God. Even before I was named by my parents, I was called "beloved child" by one more powerful than even they. That name is one that I strive to grow into a little more, every day.

Through my own learning and understanding, through God's calling and my answering, I am called "disciple." That is one box I am happy to occupy because there is plenty of room for me to continue to grow and learn, for me to be exactly who I am created to be.

These two names can be applied to everyone in this room. We are all of us children of God whether we choose to embrace that as our identity or not. And by the fact that you are sitting through this one worship service on this one day, you are a disciple, even if just for a little while. Something called you here and you listened. That's part of discipleship. Many others of us in this room are disciples every day, actively trying to figure out what that means in this complex secular world.

Being called into discipleship means now what it did in Jesus' day: We are doing our best to follow the good example of Christ. We are struggling with figuring it out. We don't know if we're always doing it right, but we're hoping that God gives out A's for effort.

There will be times when we will fail miserably at being disciples. The disciples at Jesus' feet certainly did, as we see in our story this morning. There will be days and weeks and even whole seasons when we lose sight of the importance of our many names before God. We will devalue ourselves and trust in someone else's definition of us more than our own, more even than God's. We will believe it when they call us "limited" or "small," "useless," "hopeless," "powerless," "forgotten."

We will fail by trying to define God for our own purposes, just as Peter did. And we will be rebuked. Because God is not for us to define, to create or even to know. We are God's, not the other way around.

But we will succeed sometimes, too. We will succeed when we listen for the voice of God and then follow through rather than arguing for our own agenda.

We'll be successful disciples when we begin to understand that "bearing up one's cross" doesn't mean living through something terrible or carrying around some kind of difficult burden, it means taking great personal risk for doing what's right, particularly for the sake of others. Cross-bearing is difficult work, it isn't for the faint of spirit. But then, we disciples have never been faint of spirit.

We will be successful disciples when we act like disciples, that is, living with honesty and integrity in all things and with all people.

And finally, we will be successful disciples at those times when we know ourselves to be—without doubts or hesitation—beloved children of a God whose love knows no boundaries, who wants us to follow and wants us to succeed.