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Dearly beloved, we are gathered

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Nov. 6, 2009

?What name do you give your child?? This is the first question of the baptismal rite. Before we ask about faith, before we speak of the duties of parents and godparents, we ask for the child?s name. No one goes into the waters of baptism anonymously. No strangers enter the font. No aliens are anointed with sweet-smelling oil and robed in white garments. The child who is baptized has a name.

She has the name her parents have chosen, a name that links her to a tradition and to those who have gone before her in faith. And she has the names the church bestows upon her: Welcomed with Great Joy, Bathed in Light, Faithful Follower, Temple of God?s Glory, Life in Abundance, Forever a Member of Christ, New Creation, Child of God.

A lifetime of raising children and working with children has tuned my ear to the names they are sometimes given at school and on the street, and at home. Everyone has heard them: Stupid and Fat and Bitch and Fag. There are Sundays when I think the best reason to gather for Mass is the chance to hear, once again, our true names spoken. Like the chrism of salvation poured out upon us on the day of our baptisms, the sound of the names the church has given is a balm. Not Poor, but Dearly Beloved; not Illegal, but Gift. We are the ones of whom the eucharistic prayer says: ?From age to age you gather a people to yourself, so that from east to west a perfect offering may be made to the glory of your name.?

We, and not someone smarter or richer, but *we*, we are the people God gathers.

I?ve been haunted by those words, ?What name do you give this child?? ever since the news broke in late 2007 of a young man shooting people in an Omaha, Neb., mall. He left a note before he went to the mall and began firing. It read: ?Now, I?ll be famous.? At last, he would have a name.

I cannot help but wonder how this story might have ended had he known his true name, some name other than ?Killer,? the one by which we all now know him.

The first detail the angel gives Mary about her son is his name, Jesus. Zechariah?s mouth is opened and speech restored him once he knows and bestows his son?s name, John. There is nothing generic here, ?special child? or ?gifted one.? They have names.

What does it mean to carry the name of a grandparent or a martyr? How does one bear the weight of such a name? How can one hope to occupy the landscape of a hallowed name? What does it mean to bear a name from ancestral lands, a name in an ancestral language? What about an unlikely American president whose unlikely middle name is Hussein?

What does it mean to come to Mass each Sunday and be called ?brothers and sisters? and ?dear friends in Christ?? How can we stand as brothers and sisters to people we have never met? How can we live as ?dear friends in Christ? with those we dislike or fear?

Would it make any difference if, on the day of our baptism, we had been referred to as simply ?the child??

Not long after the shootings in Omaha, a young man opened fire at a church in my town. He killed two young girls, sisters. The debate here now involves policemen and armed security guards at churches. ?We need protection,? many say. ?We need guns in case another killer targets a church.?

And I wonder, what if, instead, we all knew our true names.

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