

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 7, 2018  
Genesis 2:18-24

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### **Naming and Perspective**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Two men look out through the same bars;  
One sees mud, and one the stars. (Frederick Langridge, 1896)

This morning's Old Testament lesson speaks of our power to name. God brought the animals to Adam to see what he would name them, and the power of naming continues to be our heritage. We name our inventions, our circumstances, our lot. And that is the message of those poetic lines of Frederick Langridge.

Two men look out through the same bars;  
One sees mud, and one the stars."

Why is it that two individuals gazing out on the same scene see such very different things and name the identical view in opposite terms? One pair of eyes chooses to look down to the lowest and dirtiest dimension of what is there, while the other chooses to look up to the intimations of splendor in that scene. Mud and stars or their equivalents, are to be found in almost every situation. What is it that causes one person to gravitate to the ugly and grim, while another concentrates on the beauty and the grace?

We have been endowed by our creator with the gift of interpretation, of naming. And, if you don't mind my saying so, it seems odd to me that we should read again from the book of Genesis after just having completed our Season of Creation.

This may seem odd to the modern ear. But in ancient times, naming was seen as a profound process. It involved the ability to know the characteristics of a given object and then to decide what significance that object was going to have for one's life. The ability to name became a very important power and represents human freedom and creativity of the highest sort.

Did you hear about the discovery of what may be a new contender for the ninth planet in our solar system? Poor old Pluto, which I grew up thinking of as a planet, was downgraded in 2006 from planet to dwarf planet. The new body, only suggested by the behavior of another recently-discovered dwarf planet nicknamed "The Goblin" (how appropriate as we look towards All Hallows Eve!) is likely another Neptune-sized planet. I mention it only because I have enjoyed the controversy over what to call it—even

before it is actually discovered.

Naming is important. We aren't free to determine the shape of realities beyond ourselves; they have life and existence of their own. But we are free to decide what significance those particular realities are going to have for us, which is what it means to name. It is part of our human uniqueness, and explains how two individuals can look through the same bars, with one seeing mud, the other stars—or planets. The creatures looking out on all these objects are by nature name-givers, evaluators, determiners-of-significance.

But the giving of names and its importance doesn't stop there. An extremely relevant factor is our vantage point—the beginning assumptions that we have about life when we “look through the bars.” How do we view the business of existence? How did it come to be and what is its nature?

I suspect that we have two basic options here. We can view existence as something that is ours by right, something to which we are entitled. Or, we can regard existence as a gift, something that comes to us apart from our deserving or earning it and the result of another's generosity and hospitality. If you haven't given the matter much thought, these options may not sound too significant, but they are. Where you begin has much to do with where you end; and one's basic vantage point is utterly crucial to naming.

Here's a humorous story told by Dr. Bill Foege at a conference I attended that illustrates.

A woman wishing to visit Canada did not expect to be stopped at the border. The immigration officer went through his routine questioning:

"What is your nationality?"

"I'm an American." she responds.

"And your occupation?"

"I'm a comedian."

Now the immigration officer thinks that she said, "I'm a Canadian", so he says: "But I thought you said you were an American."

Now it's the woman's turn to be confused. She thinks this guy imagines that you can't be funny and be an American. So she takes a more confrontational approach, contending: "Will Rogers was an American, and he was funny."

Perplexed, the immigration officer counters with: "What do you think you are, a comedian?"

"No," the woman rejoins, "I'm an American."

Perspective and expectation skew perception. Here's another story from Dr. Foegel:

A tourist visiting the outback of Australia asks a local about the presence of her brothers and sisters in the faith.

"Do you have many Baptists out here?"

The young man has heard the question so many times, he thought she said, "Are there any rabbits out here?" And so he goes into his common response:

"You bet we do. There are so many of them, they've become a nuisance."

"We have resorted to hunting them down and shooting them."

"But it doesn't do any good. They just keep on multiplying."

These stories begin to get at the significance of perspective. But here are a couple others that may make my point more effectively and more personally.

Have you ever gone on vacation only to find yourself expecting more than you get? I remember taking a trip to Chicago and spending, even with a discount, far more than I thought was reasonable for the room. The little things started to bother me. I opened a window, but it wouldn't close. I called the desk several times to get someone up to fix it. I was amazed that such an expensive hotel could have such problems. Then I found that the cable on the television had been disconnected. Incredible! I expected much more for what I was paying. In that case, though, I fixed it myself. I was tired of interruptions.

My point in telling the story is my sense of entitlement. Paying so much for a room raised my level of expectations beyond what was reasonable, and it colored much of my experience of that trip.

Over against that scene, let me place another. Several years ago, my brothers and our families went camping at Turkey Run State Park. It was hot. It was muggy. We had to put up the tents in incredible heat. We slept on the hard, dry, packed dirt, scorched from the lack of rain. We couldn't go canoeing as we had hoped because of low water in the river. We cooked all of our own meals. It was, to say the least, a far cry from the comparative luxury of the hotel in Chicago.

But we loved every minute. The swimming pool that had been closed because of high algae levels was opened, and we found a place to cool off. Instead of canoeing, we went on long hikes through the beautiful and cool canyons in the park. We built roaring fires and cooked pizzas and s'mores and hot dogs and cheese sandwiches. We sang songs and told stories with aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews; and we had a wonderful time.

Through it all, I don't recall a twinge of resentment or outrage at any of the inconveniences. Why? Because it was experienced as a gift! We had been given the time for vacation. It was an especially rare gift that the schedules of the three brothers and their families permitted such a gathering. We were there to enjoy one another and the blessings of God's creation.

And I think these two stories get at the matter of vantage point. In the one case, an exorbitant price created a sense of entitlement; and that in turn affected my attitude towards every detail of that hotel. In the other case, the sense of gift and good fortune was so prevalent that all the details were seen in a positive rather than negative light.

With those experiences as a backdrop, perhaps you can see why perspective is all-important when it comes to interpreting or "naming" the various experiences of life. If your beginning point is a sense of entitlement, then dissatisfaction and criticism will probably become your mood; and angry demand will characterize most of your interactions with others.

The world is filled with such people; indeed, the spirit of entitlement seems to be on the rise in any number of contexts. Think what a difference it would make if life were regarded as a gift rather than a right. Carlyle Marney writes about a girl who was born without arms or legs but was greatly cherished and cared for by her family, and through special education developed a fantastic mind and spirit. When she was twenty years old, her brother brought home a friend from college, a sophomore majoring in philosophy and apt to pronounce judgments about everything. After three days in that home, he blurted out to the girl: "Don't you wish at times that you had never been born? How on earth can you believe in a God of purpose and love when you look at yourself and see other people with arms and legs and the opportunities to move about and do and achieve? If I were you, I would curse whatever dealt me an impoverished hand."

To which the girl answered calmly, "I wouldn't have missed the chance to be alive for anything in the world. I suppose what has been available to me seems very little when compared to the opportunities many other people get, but when compared to not having existed at all, to never seeing, never tasting, never smelling, never hearing, never knowing the delights of reading and thinking and relating, I'm overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to live that has been mine."

Now that is precisely the sort of interpretation that becomes possible when the starting point is a sense of unmerited gift rather than rightful entitlement. The biblical fact is that God did not have to create anything. God wanted to! It was God's decision and God's alone; and it was a joyous, generous act. God found the fact of existence so overwhelmingly joyous that it was too good to keep to God's self. It was an act of giving, pure and simple, and if that realization ever gets through to us sufficiently that it becomes our vantage point, then we're in a position to do two things: To make the best of the less than perfect aspects of our situation, and to make the most of the positive

possibilities that are ours.

Perhaps that sophomore learned a lesson from the young woman. If our existence were something we bought or paid for or earned in any way, then a sense of entitlement would be justified. But who of us can claim such a thing? Who of us had anything to do with being brought into being or all of the goodness and mercy that surrounds us in times of trouble? None!

No. Life is a gift. It is much more like tent camping than it is staying in fancy hotels. And, you know, I have enjoyed camping more. Not because of the objective conditions but because the sense of entitlement can ruin a hotel stay. And the feeling of being gifted can exalt even the hard earth.

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One sees mud, and one the stars."

The power to choose our perspective, the power to evaluate, the power to name that is a gift from God is no small matter. In this culture of rights and privileges, entitlements and materialism, we need to give naming and perspective some time for contemplation, perhaps especially in this season of considering our stewardship. Else our souls may become smeared by vision that looks down to the mud rather than up into the beauty and glory of God's good creation. And our lives may be far more a burden than the blessing that God intends. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.