“Baby Names”

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

It started with a handwritten list jotted down on one of those notepads you get in the mail with charity solicitations. We noted some names off the top of our heads, then stuck that slip of paper on our fridge with a magnet and came back to it from time to time to read it over, add some new ideas, and cross off the ones that no longer resonated.

Then, as the weeks and months went by, we got more serious. We consulted the website of the Social Security Administration, where—it turns out—you can find lists of the top 200 baby names for boys and girls from each decade, going all the way back to the 1880s. We made spreadsheets to compare our preferences and find the ones we shared in common. We googled first name and middle name combinations to make sure we weren’t choosing something with unfortunate connotations.

We thought about what the names meant, their derivations and etymologies, the stories and characters they would evoke. We thought about how common or unusual they were. We
thought about people we knew by those names—family members past and present, friends near and far, students, church members, public figures.

We practiced saying them aloud, trying out the feel and flavor of those sounds in our mouths. We thought about initials. We thought about nicknames. We thought about the inevitable mix-ups of our mouthful of a last name.

By the time our due date was near, we had settled on a short list, a small handful of names for each gender. And then we waited. And when our baby finally arrived, we waited a little more, until it was clear to us that this new little person’s name was Samuel David.

In June, just over a week after Samuel was born, 50 people were killed in the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. They were mostly LGBT folks, mostly people of color. And the thing I kept thinking as I read those breaking news reports on my phone, rocking endlessly back and forth in the wee hours of the morning, was this: those were somebody’s babies. Someone changed their diapers and hushed their crying and rocked them in the middle of the night. Someone made lists of names and settled on Enrique, and Yilmary, and Miguel, and Mercedez, and Javier, and Akyra, and so many others.

In July, other names entered our public discourse, the names of people of color killed in encounters with law enforcement. Alton Sterling in Louisiana. Philando Castile in Minnesota. The names became hashtags on Facebook and Twitter. And all I could think was that these, too, were somebody’s babies. Someone carried each of them in her womb for nine months and labored to bring them into the world. Those names-that-are-now-hashtags were once written on a tiny hospital bracelet, on the ID card on a bassinet, on an application for a birth certificate.

In August, another name became part of the news cycle, the name of a five-year-old Syrian child pulled from the rubble of a bombed-out building in Aleppo. Like the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old refugee child whose body washed up on a beach in Turkey last fall, the image of Omran Daqneesh captured the attention of the world. In the aftermath of an airstrike, he is sitting beside an orange first aid kit, bare feet hanging off the front of a too-big ambulance seat, face covered in soot and blood, eyes that have seen far too much staring straight ahead into the camera. And all I could think was that Omran, too, was somebody’s baby, as were the hundreds and thousands of children like him whose images we do not see. Someone waited and hoped for who knows how long for him to arrive in their family. Someone sang his name in the silly, nonsensical, made-up songs that are the common language of sleep-deprived parents everywhere.

Just this week, still more names have been the subject of news reports and social media conversations. Keith Lamont Scott and Terence Crutcher are the latest black men to die highly publicized, video recorded deaths at the hands of police. And once again, I can’t help but think of them as somebody’s babies, tiny and tender and vulnerable. I can’t help but imagine the deliberation and the hope that went into choosing their names, names that were once written on lunch boxes and backpacks and homework assignments, names that are now part of the
excruciating story of race and racism in this nation, names that will soon be written on tombstones.

Terence and Keith, Omran and Alan, Philando and Alton, Enrique and Yilmary and so many others—names that carry meanings and stories, names carefully chosen and lovingly given, names that invite us to perceive the whole personhood of the human being who bears them.

The same is true for Lazarus.

In the time of Jesus, they didn’t have spreadsheets or Social Security websites or charity solicitation notepads under magnets on their refrigerators. They didn’t have hospital bracelets or bassinet ID cards or birth certificate application forms. They didn’t have hashtags; nothing ever went viral on social media. But they did have names. And surely the parents of Lazarus undertook their own version of this naming process, too. We don’t know anything more about Lazarus than we heard in the reading of the parable, but the very fact that his name is given invites us to imagine that part of his story.

Someone must have thought about meanings and etymologies, stories and characters, relatives and friends. Someone must have chosen that name for that baby. Someone must have pronounced it for the first time while looking into a tiny, scrunched-up newborn face. Someone must have proclaimed it before God and the gathered community in the baby-dedication rituals of the time. Someone chose that name for him, and somehow, even all these centuries later, we still know him by that name, Lazarus. And somehow, between the moment in which he was named and the moment in which we meet him, he became the poor, destitute man lying at the rich man’s gate with stray dogs licking his open wounds.

It is worth noting that poor, destitute Lazarus is given a name in this parable, while the rich man dressed in purple is not. By naming one and not the other, Jesus invites his listeners to do what the rich man in the story could not: see the full humanity of Lazarus, recognize his personhood, understand that he was not just another bag of bones on the side of the road, but somebody’s baby.

The rich man shows no sign of ever noticing Lazarus while they are alive. He doesn’t actively harm Lazarus, but his sin of omission is almost worse, for it indicates that the rich man does not recognize a fellow human being who is suffering, a person whose pain he might be able to alleviate. Even in death, when he somehow seems to have learned Lazarus’ name, he still cannot truly see him. He speaks of Lazarus only in the third person, rather than addressing him directly, and he speaks of him only as a tool for the benefit of himself and his family.

“Abraham, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue,” the rich man says. “Or, if you won’t do that, then send him to warn my brothers and save them from my fate.” And Abraham says no. Not vindictively, not delighting in the rich man’s comeuppance, but simply as a statement of fact. There is a chasm between them, and Lazarus cannot cross it.

If anyone is going to cross that abyss, it has to be the rich man himself. The only way to bridge that gap is for the rich man to learn to see Lazarus in his full humanity. The distance
between them is a rift the rich man created for himself when he hid away in his gated community and numbed his senses with fine food and all the delights that money could buy. To close that distance, he is the one who must move. He must draw near to Lazarus. He must feel Lazarus’ suffering as his own. He must invest himself and his resources in binding up Lazarus’ wounds and feeding his hungry belly—and he must invest himself and his resources in changing the systems that led to Lazarus’ destitution.

And although this parable is set in the afterlife, its message is not really about avoiding eternal torment and earning an eternal reward—it’s about the way we live, here and now, in this life, on this earth. Jesus told this story to inspire those who heard him to change their ways now, to transform their lives now, to remake their society now. He told this story to remind his listeners that those who suffer, those who are made invisible by the divisions we create between ourselves, have names, identities, worth and dignity—that they are somebody’s baby. And not just anybody’s baby—they are God’s babies, God’s children. And if we have ears to hear his message, then we will be able—then we will be compelled—to work for a world in which every person is treated in accordance with their truest name, the one God picked out for each of us from all the possible names in the world: Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.