

Sermon What's in a Name?

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Reading: Excerpt from *Hattie on the Block* by Dolores Kendrick
My Soul is a Witness, pp 27-29.

1860 Census for Tippah County Mississippi

1 female aged 56
1 female aged 53
1 male aged 50
1 male aged 40
1 female aged 39
1 male aged 36
1 female aged 33
1 female aged 33
1 male aged 30
2 females aged 30
1 female aged 27
1 male aged 24
1 male aged 22
1 female aged 21
1 male aged 21
1 female of 20
1 male aged 19
1 male aged 18
1 male aged 17
1 male aged 16
1 female aged 14
1 female aged 14
1 male aged 13
1 female aged 12
1 male aged 10
1 male aged 9
1 female aged 8
1 female aged 7
1 female aged 6
1 male aged 4
1 male aged 4
1 male aged 4
1 female aged 3
1 female aged 2
1 female aged 2
1 male aged 1
1 female aged 1
1 male aged 10/12
1 female aged 7/12
1 female aged 3/12

Sermon: What's in a Name?

According to the 1860 census, my great great grandfather Harmon Waldrup owned 47 slaves.

The cousin who reported on her research complained of the lazy census takers, darn it, who didn't record their names.

Harmon's youngest child, my great-grandmother Kate Waldrup Joiner lost her mother when she was three, and came into the love and care of Aunt Lizzie. Kate left the plantation after the end of the Civil War to join her brothers in Texas. She never saw her father again, but kept up a correspondence with Lizzie.

New Albany Miss
Union Co. Feb. 17 1899

Dear Honey,

Well you don't have any idea how glad I was to get your letter. Just to see those lines, & think whose fingers wrote it, made the tears come in my eyes and my heart leap for joy. Well we are all very well and getting along as well as could be expected. All the children are with me but Bernia. She is married and has six children. I have one boy and three girls with me. Their names are John, Allice, Cassie and Luler. They are all smart good children and well thought of by white and black. I will send you our pictures as soon as we can get them taken. I will be sure to send you mine.

I hope it wont be long before I hear from you again and get that picture. I am going to send you a nice present too some of these days. Always think of me as your fond old nurse Lizzie Waldrop

With a few strokes of her pen, Lizzie brought her family out of the desert of statistics and breathed life into them. Their names are Bernia, John, Alice, Cassie and Luler. We're going to exchange pictures. They stayed in and around New Albany, except for John. John was the rebel. John declined to be a Methodist. John left Mississippi and headed north for Chicago Illinois.

I go back to this genealogy, re-read these letters as a spiritual practice. They keep me on the journey of discovery and historical place. I come from people who could treat a three month old girl as a possession. I come from people who could forge a loving bond that spanned over 45 years.

I know, you're thinking, this is so far from here. It's 160 years ago. It's Mississippi not Middleboro. What does this have to do with me?

There is something universal about namelessness. Something dehumanizing. Think about times when you haven't been called by name but by a label or a number. Think back on what that was like for you. Maybe it was benign; on the back of a sports jersey, or at the deli. But maybe, just maybe, it was a time of trauma. Emergency room. Prison.

Maybe it was being lumped together as 'other.'
A diagnosis. A victim. A conviction. A statistic. A gender.
A class. A job. A skin color. A culture. A region. A language.
Think about the times you have dealt with someone who didn't care about your name, didn't know you but made assumptions about you. Think about the times that assumption was derogatory or suspicious.

We hear stories every day; stories that treat people not as names but as labels.

It's the great drive to make general assumptions rather than pay attention to the particular.
General assumptions make it so much easier to navigate life, don't they?
Our consciences are less disturbed, our morals unquestioned.
We are living once again in a political climate that tolerates labeling, no, encourages it.
It has always been easier to throw away labels than it is to throw away people.
Think about the times you make assumptions about others,
Assumptions that are derogatory, suspicious.

I suggest to you that thinking of people as categories rather than individuals
is the first step to oppression and a few steps away from violence.

We come to the next spiritual practice I try to adhere to:
Immediately recognizing labels,
immediately refusing to strip people of their names.
Becoming aware of how widespread this is on our part and on the parts of those we encounter in our daily lives, our
conversations, newspapers, blogs, commentaries.

We learn to make general assumptions from our families, from our cultures.
And we can unlearn them. It is hard work, but worth every moment.

One of my people that started me down on this path is the Rev. David Pettee.
He was the UUA's director of Ministerial Credentialing as I was going through the process
and during one of our conversations we discovered that we had something in common:
our families' connection to slavery.
It was not passed down to us by our grandparents
even though it was part of our family history.
Pettee had to dig it out during his hobby of genealogy.
I had it tossed my way in a casual comment by my mother toward the end of her life.
At the same time she handed me fat folders of my grandmother's research.

What do we do with this once we become aware?
I don't know yet. I'm still working on it.
I learned from David you have to sit with it.
I know you have to hunger for the individual stories behind the numbers, the labels.
I have a goal but not necessarily have the space, the bandwidth right now.
But by God I will not close my eyes to this now that they're opened.

There is a process of coming to terms with the fact that we can hurt people we don't know
and that we can be hurt by people who don't know us.
Our inclination is claim 'that wasn't me, I had nothing to do with it,' and facing forward.
Let's just get past this and move along.
It's a discipline to say 'who am I hurting by not knowing who they are; by ignoring their story.'
'how am I hurting by not accepting my family's history,
by not accepting I am part of the complexity of brokenness?
What would this world be like if I took the time to find out?
What kind of person might this make us?
A tree hugger? A do-gooder? Naïve dreamer?

What is our obligation as people of faith?
It is what it always was and will be:
Lean into, live into the heartbreak of the world and believe in the restorative power of love.
That's the only way we'll survive.