

Not All The Names

2025 06 29 Pride Sunday

Exodus 1:1-5

Revelation 7:4-9

Many of us have tried to read the Bible from cover to cover. It starts well, with stories of people and places and exciting encounter. But we get stuck in long lists of names. Chapter after chapter of names of sons who had sons who had sons.

In her book *Womanist Midrash*, theologian Wilda Gafney opens the book of Exodus and reads '*These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. (Joseph was already in Egypt.)*'¹ When she studies the text she responds: 'These are not all the names'.²

There are names of military leaders, craftsmen, heads of families, priests. These are names of men. These are not all the names. Gafney writes about the women, named and unnamed, whose action is essential for the story to unfold, the women without whom there would be no sons of sons. Gafney writes about the women and children without names, and with her 'sanctified imagination' she dares to tell their stories. Faith does not always need the names.

This week I read over the timeline prepared by Michele Rizoli that tells the story of TUMC's journey towards the full inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals³. The timeline spans fifty years in five pages and weaves detailed congregational discussions with references to real people. There are no names in this timeline. This is intentional, to protect privacy and help us know this as a story of our church. I'm in that timeline, and if you are part of this congregation, you are too.

¹ Exodus 1:1-5

² Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, 87-88.

³ Available in the community (logged-in) part of the TUMC website:
www.tumc.ca/?page_id=8421

Peter Haresnape

A trans activist friend of mine, also a minister, told me an interesting personal theory about names in the New Testament. My friend noticed that the activist community developed ways of talking without mentioning names, to protect people who might be targeted by police. In the earliest gospels, often the names of women will be missing, but are present in later gospels – perhaps since those women had died and were now safe from being persecuted. The gospels say that Jesus was supported by women, named and unnamed, who followed him all the way to the cross and beyond. Their faithfulness inspires our faith, even when do not know their names.

We mostly do not know the names of the people who are making change in the world, even with our databases of information and communication technology. We mostly do not know the names of Palestinian nurses, of Rainbow Railroad organisers, of overnight personal support workers, of diplomats working backchannels, of donors with faithful vision, of babies who will one day solve the problems we are making. It is good to share names, but faith does not require it.

Last week we thanked, by name, all the people who formally support our Faith Formation programme, and it took a long time, and it was important. Being a pastor I see lists of names, I hear private stories of unknown support, I sense some of the invisible cloud of witnesses that join us in giving thanks to God. We don't have all the names, and faith does not require them.

Our church's continuing story of queer inclusion is a story with a lot of names that are not known. Those names we know have stories that we do not know. That is okay; faith does not require everything to be known, but we are trying to be a community that can speak and hear the truth, and can hold nuance, and can recognise that God's created and called people is always more complicated and diverse than we think it is.

When I first came out as gay I struggled with the fact that my experience did not fit the coming out story. This wasn't something I had known since I was a little boy, and it wasn't something I had agonised over. I hadn't come to Canada looking for the freedom to live an authentic life, I had come here to learn about treaties and be an

ally to Indigenous land defenders and a nuisance to the government. And somewhere in the middle of an intersecting, ecumenical community of justice seekers struggling with the world as it is and earnest agitators imagining the world as it should be, I learned something new about myself. But my story didn't fit what I had heard.

In the book of Revelation⁴, John of Patmos hears a story of 'all the names' who have had a special place prepared for them in God's eternal community. But when he turns to look – he sees something different than he had heard. Chapter 7 starting at verse 4:

And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

*From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.*

Will Gafney might remind us – these are not all the names. Verse nine:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

⁴ Revelation 7:4-9

Instead of an orderly army of 144,000 men in neat squares of rank and file, of one language and one heritage and one way, this is a crowd that no one can count, a street festival, a parade, a party. This is the mother of all church celebrations, omnilingual, multi-coloured, crowded close around the Holy One, ready to dance.

Two weeks ago we heard words from the gospel of John, chapter 16 verse 12-13, in the final teachings of Jesus before his execution. *'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.'*⁵

What we have heard, what you have been told, what the world claims to know about you is awaiting the declaration of the Spirit of truth. There are things that we could not bear to hear, once upon a time. But Jesus is still speaking.

Wherever you place yourself on all the intersecting spectrums, you are valid, you are loved, and Jesus has prepared a place for you. By whatever names and pronouns, with whichever letters you know yourself – Trans, Two-Spirit, Genderqueer, Bisexual, Pansexual, Asexual, Aromantic, Lesbian, Queer, Gay, Questioning, Intersex, Ally, Parent, Lover, Fighter, and always more – if it is not known to you, or not known to your community, that is okay. Faith does not require the name. You are valid, you are loved, and Jesus has done whatever is needed to prepare a place for you. And the rest of us will do our best to do the same. AMEN.

⁵ John 16:12-13