This morning we continue our focus on the church and mental health, and our theme today is naming and labeling. Let me begin with a story about names.

I went to seminary with someone who took a long time to figure out what her name was. She began life as Ginger, which itself is probably a nickname, and I think the name of her family of origin was Shea. Let's say it was. She was Ginger Shea. She decided to become a nun, entered the convent, and there she received a new name: Sister Mary. She changed her mind about being a nun and left, becoming Ginger Shea again. That was about the time she entered a Protestant seminary, and shortly after that she changed again from Ginger back to Mary. Mary Shea. Then she met and married Wayne Lowe, becoming Mary Lowe, which was how I knew her. Later, after she had a couple of little boys, she took the name she had always wanted to name the daughter she never had, Rebecca Elowyn, and that was the last I heard. Fast forward 30 years to a conversation about Wayne and Ginger/Mary/Rebecca that I had with another seminary classmate, when we thought that maybe they were moving to Chicago. "Wayne, oh yeah, I remember him," said Ted. "What was her name? His wife? You know who I mean: Bumblebee."

Mary was odd. Loopy. Unusual. Eccentric. I'm looking for a word I can use for which I do not need to offer a prayer of confession, but much of language we use to talk about people whom we perceive to be different, or who behave differently from us, is pejorative. Even the scientific language is a little negative. I'm sure it could be said, if we measured 1970s North American naming practices statistically, that Mary's naming behavior was two or more standard deviations away from the norm. But, in honest reflection, I have to admit that, on some measure, probably every woman who was attending seminary in those days measured a couple standard deviations from the norm.

Listen to the language. Standard deviations. Norms. Naming others, labeling them, and our understandings of what's normal or "abnormal" go hand in hand, don't they.

So, how do we know what's normal?

My husband Tony likes to tell the story of a conversation he had with our older son Geoffrey, when Geoff was about 8 or 9 years old. We were living in Connecticut, where I was the pastor of a small Presbyterian congregation in downtown Hartford. One day, Tony and Geoff were in the car and they passed another church building. I think it was Roman Catholic or Orthodox. Geoff asked about it, and they talked about different churches that his friends attended. Then Geoff said, "Why can't everybody just go to the normal church?"

Normal is often whatever it is, with which we are most comfortable. Or, if you measure it statistically, normal is the area on the graph where the dots are the most dense and represent similarity; and those dots out on the outer edges represent what is different, or deviant, or anomalous, or an outlier.

Normality is not set in stone. Rather, what is "normal" is an interpretation of a situation that a group of people makes together. And those interpretations change. Thirty or forty years ago it was normal to dress

somewhat formally for church. Men wore coats and ties, even suits; women wore dresses and skirts, maybe hats and dress gloves. Now it is normal to wear jeans and a sweater to church. No one person made the decision to change the standards of normal dress for worship; we shifted; we made that decision gradually, as congregational groups.

What we understand to be normal shifts all the time. What we understand to be acceptable changes. Steve King has been race-baiting and using racist language for years, but it took until last week for him to be publicly censured for it. Now, that whole situation is tangled and complicated, and we are a long way from erasing racist language and tropes from our talking. It remains to be seen if the Steve King censure is just a one-off, or if indeed the needle of normativity about racist language is moving a bit. My point is that what is considered to be normal, and thus acceptable, is not static.

Last week I read Erving Goffman's book Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.[1] He makes some very interesting points about our perceptions and practices of normality, difference, and stigma.

One point he makes is that what is considered to be normal and what is considered to be stigmatized are both part of the same continuum, and one cannot exist without the other. Our identities are interrelated.[2] They are constructed in relationship to each other, just like darkness and light, for example. If there is no such thing as light, then there is no such thing as the absence of light. The two are defined in relationship with each other. The same is true of our identities and perceptions of difference. Identity labels like "crazy" or "sane" are mutually dependent. We are all part of the same continuum, as Lydia said last week.

Another point Goffman makes is how much pressure we put on stigmatized people to protect people who are perceived to be normal. We put all kinds of expectations on stigmatized people to make the rest of us feel comfortable. For example, we place boundaries around the appropriateness of self-disclosure. We expect that stigmatized people will receive graciously all expressions of help, sympathy, and understanding, no matter how awkward or inappropriate those might be. We put pressure on stigmatized people to excel in tactfulness. This results in just what people considered to be normal want, says Goffman. They "will not have to admit to themselves how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is; it means that [they] can remain relatively uncontaminated by intimate contact with the stigmatized."[3] We are all complicit in building a cocoon around normality, however it's defined.

Naming is one way we do that. Naming is a powerful process. There is a negative side to it. There was a wonderful episode of the Big Bang Theory in which Howard Wolowitz was taking his first journey as an astronaut, and he was eager to get his space nickname. He talked with his wife and friends about the nickname, and decided he wanted to be called Rocketman; he set his ringtone to that tune, hoping to give the other astronauts a hint. But that was not how he got his nickname. Instead, when the other astronauts overheard a conversation Howard had with his mother, who asked him if he had a supply of his favorite cereal, Fruit Loops, that settled everything. He was never Rocketman. He was Fruit Loops, and he just hated the nickname and the disrespect that accompanied it.

We laugh about Howard Wolowitz, but negative naming is not a laughing matter. It can be deeply destructive, as we saw on the campaign trail. Crooked Hillary, Lyin' Ted, and Little Marco all suffered from the monikers that Donald Trump assigned them. They could not get out from under those descriptions. Anybody who was ever assigned a negative nickname in junior high knows how that works. We know how those names stick and how demeaning they can be. We may say, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me," but that's not true. Negative names do hurt. They stigmatize. They isolate. They transform a multi-

[1]Erving Goffman. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).
[2]Ibid., 126-139.
[3]Ibid., 121.

dimensional person into a single dimension, whatever that name or label signifies. That renders invisible the rich complexity and potential of that person. The stigmatized person becomes her label: crazy, insane, demented, maniacal, hysterical.

We have a multitude of labels that we use to categorize people with regard to mental health. Most of them are negative. Some of them even hint at criminality. Someone pointed out to me last week that the language we use to speak of suicide is similar to the language we use to talk about crime: attempting suicide, committing suicide. We do not "commit" legal behavior; we "commit" crimes.

Negative naming is enormously destructive. It is hurtful to those who are named, those who live with the label. It's destructive in other ways as well. First, it's destructive for those of us who do the labeling, because it fools us into thinking that we really are different from the people we single out as other than normal. But Goffman is right that the stigmatized and the normal are interdependent categories. We are all on that mental health and wholeness continuum somewhere, and definitions change, and so do we. We blind ourselves to the fullness of our own reality when we label each other. We trick ourselves into thinking we are better than other people, or that we're safe from whatever condition we assign to them.

Second, and we will talk about this much more next week, the community suffers when we engage in negative naming. We cannot become the community God calls us to be, and we cannot become the church we want to be, when we ostracize people and separate them from our life together.

We have room to grow as a church in our capacity to welcome, support, enjoy, and advocate for people with mental illness. A place to start is by sharing stories, as Lydia suggested last week. Something else we might work on, as individuals and as a congregation, is learning new language to use as we talk about mental health, mental illness, and the wholeness we seek together. I know that I have room to grow in that area, and perhaps you do, too. This is a journey for all of us, but it's one worth taking.

Our text for this morning reminds us of how powerful a name can be. In this hymn of redemption and transformation, Isaiah promises the people that they will no longer be called Forsaken or Desolate. They will be named God's delight.

It's hard to remember sometimes, and it's even harder to believe, but the gospel truth is that every human being deserves to be recognized as God's delight, because each and every one of us is. Every human being deserves to be recognized as God's delight. Let's talk about that.