

Names and Naming Make a Difference in Perceptions of Reality

Rose Marie Tresp, RSM; Institute Justice Team

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” This may be true for roses, but it’s not true in other contexts. Even our perceptions of what we buy and eat are influenced by the name. The Chinese gooseberry in our markets is sold as the kiwi. Choosing a name for a new business or product can contribute to their success.

How we refer to peoples or groups or situations can change our perception of those people or groups. Growing up in Texas, the people around me referred to all Latinos as Mexicans. Some of those Latino families may have lived in Texas for generations. Some may have come from other Central or South American [a.k.a. Abya Yala] countries. Today, I hear people from the continent of Africa referred to as Africans. There are 54 distinct countries in Africa. There are 23 countries in the continent of North America [a.k.a. Turtle Island], but the citizens of the U.S. have appropriated the name “American.”

Even more important though is how we conflate terms. There seems to be an effort to label all undocumented immigrants – those without legal status – as “criminal immigrants” or “criminal aliens.” Protesters or those recording ICE activities are called “domestic terrorists” by the administration. The consistent use of such labels is deliberately designed to change our mental image of immigrants or protestors.

Also, how and in what context groups are spoken of that incorrectly attributes negative qualities to an entire group makes analysis of the problem more difficult. I hear people say, “I wish the bishops would...”. Which bishops? Every bishop? The USCCB as a whole? Or people say, “Congress should...”. Yes, Congress should, but who or what group in Congress is blocking the vote or the needed change? Clearly identifying what people or portions of a group can assist in creating the desired change will assist us in identifying the pressure points.

A change in our politics and culture that is highly problematic is the recent tendency to attribute negative values or negative motivations to those we disagree with. I hear, “The persons we disagree with hate America” or “They hate democracy” or “They want to take away our freedoms”, etc. The assumption is that the other person or group does not have the same values or desires for family or friends that we have, when sometimes the reality is that they simply disagree on how to obtain those desires. In effect, demonizing the party or group or persons on the other side will not lead to compromise or peace.

Pope Leo asks us to undertake a Lenten fast that is a “very practical and frequently unappreciated form of abstinence: that of refraining from words that offend and hurt our neighbor.” He writes in [his Lenten message for this year](#),

Let us begin by disarming our language, avoiding harsh words and rash judgment, refraining from slander and speaking ill of those who are not present and cannot defend themselves. Instead, let us strive to measure our words and cultivate kindness and respect. In this way, words of hatred will give way to words of hope and peace.

As children, we heard the rhyme: “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” usually recited to children not to be too sensitive to bullying or insults. But in reality, these words are not true. Teasing and bullying can lead to depression, low self-esteem and even be a factor leading to suicide.

In the end, the words we use matter. Hearing something over and over has a way of shaping the way we think. But more importantly, the words we use reveal the way we think and care about other people. People can see and hear the words we choose to write or say, and they will know who we are by the way we shape reality with our words.