

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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Baptism of Our Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What's in a Name?

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

I have called you by name.

These words to Israel bring to my mind Juliet's question to Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet..." Juliet's question is a good one; but the truth is that she couldn't get Romeo by any other name.

Because a name means something. So what's in a name? Plenty!

In the Bible a name is not simply a means of identifying someone. Rather, a name expresses the essential nature of the person and speaks to their character. That's why it's such a big deal when God reveals His name to Moses. To know someone's name is to KNOW, perhaps even to have power over them. And this is still true today - yes? - identity theft and all...

Names tell us something about a person. In the name that God reveals, we're told that God's essential nature is being: "I am who I am." And when Jesus is named, it is to remind us that "he will save his people." Jesus means "the one who saves," and Christ means "anointed one/messiah" (not Jesus' last name!).

There are lots of names in the Bible and elsewhere that are descriptive of the person, or the situation into which they were born, or reflective of who their parents were, telling us something about that person.

Martin Luther King for example. The civil rights leader was born Michael King Jr. However, his father, Michael King Sr., a Baptist pastor, traveled to Germany and became so inspired by the Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther, that he changed his own name as well as that of his five-year-old son.

How excellent that the name "Martin Luther" is alive and reforming in our time as well as 500 years ago! And names take on the meaning of who or what they name, just as people take on the meaning of what they name.

Something similar happens with the names of things and products in our everyday lives. We say Kleenex rather than tissue, Vaseline rather than petroleum jelly, Xerox machine rather than copy machine, in some parts of the country to ask for a Coke is to ask for a soda.

These names have come to mean something, and there are times, even when the generic might be cheaper, that we prefer the name brand.

Given what we know (and who we are), what we name someone or something makes a difference.

Hear again the prophet's word from the Lord for us today:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

To think that God has named us, claimed us, and knows us by name, by our essential nature, is no small thing! Even more, by naming us, God has called us into a community. God names us not just as individuals, but also as a community, and says that we are His.

Here's what another pastor has to say about this:

Of course, belonging to a community carries a price tag. That price tag entails, in part, sublimating your own agenda and buying into the agenda of the community. It involves contributing [all] your gifts so that they can be a resource to the whole....making the choice to permit God to transform me into the kind of person who will be useful in the life and work of the community. (Milton Schwarzentruer)

Belonging to a church is not belonging to a club; it is a response to a call to be a certain kind of person. God names us: People of God / Church - that's OUR brand name. And as we know, name brands tend to cost a bit more. Though if it is worth it, I will be willing to pay for it.

So what is it worth to us to be a part of a community that extends back 2,000 years and forward to the end of time? What's it worth to us to hear what Jesus heard, "This is my beloved child"? Well, that's exactly what we do hear today, and what I would hope we experience within this community.

Let's think of it this way...Very good paper, especially paper used for printing money has a special mark woven into it called the watermark. It comes from the manufacturing process and leaves an imprint in the very fabric of the paper that can only be seen when you hold it up to the light.

Watermarks identify and authenticate the quality of the paper. The watermark tells you that this is not generic paper, but something of very high quality. And in the case of our currency, the watermark lets you know that the bill you have is not counterfeit - it really is money.

For Christians, baptism is our watermark. In the sacrament we are named and identified as belonging to God, hence the term, "christening" that some churches use interchangeably for baptism,

And even though we name our children even before they are born, when we baptize them here, you may notice that we don't say the actual name of the child, instead referring to it as "the child" until after we ask the parents, "And by what name shall we baptize this child?" It's as if that which had no name is now given a name.

Because at that moment we are called by name, we are claimed by the Lord as God's own, and we are marked by the Holy Spirit's power and authenticated as a child of God.

And so if baptism is our watermark, then the light that reveals the watermark for us is our life. Because with our name comes a mission - a purpose. Does our life show the presence of God by our actions, our attitudes, our thoughts and or words? After all, we are given the gift of God's Spirit - for a purpose - so that we may be transformed, and ourselves become instruments of transformation in our world.

Held up to the light of the world's scrutiny, what do others see? Because, just because you've been given the gift, doesn't necessarily mean it'll be realized in your life.

It's like the young girl who was blessed with incredible abilities as a dancer, whose teacher thought she had the potential to pursue a professional career in ballet. She had all the physical gifts to be a prima ballerina. But you know what she didn't have? The desire. She didn't WANT to be a ballerina.

Baptism is like this. God gives a great gift - that the heavens will open and the Holy Spirit will be present in our lives. But sometimes, gifts remain unopened, unused. It takes vision (the eyes of faith perhaps) to take yourself seriously as a baptized person who can go out into the world, cast out demons, feed the homeless, teach Sunday school, visit your aunt in the nursing home, or whatever it is that God puts in your way as a means of serving Him and transforming the world.

The watermark of the Spirit may be on us, but if it's not held up to the light of service, if the gift isn't used, it can't be seen.

Our good name - Christian - is our identity. And we are to be more than generic Christians, or “knock off” Christians. God has called us each by name to be His own and to reflect his love and presence to the world around us.

The gift of the Holy Spirit enlivens the image of God in each one of us, and draws into a community of faith. We are marked to reflect God’s love and presence in His world. Our being “name brand,” bearing the watermark of the faith, is a gift so that we might say to others as well, “You too are God’s beloved child.”

It’s good for us today to think about who we are and the name we bear as “one of Christ’s” - as Christians.

Because “what’s in a name” is everything; because our name is Christian. We are baptized, and the heavens open - every day. And every day the world opens. It becomes more free for us and for our neighbors, as we are freed from all that binds us - from not being good enough, smart enough, thin enough, wealthy enough.

What IS enough is that you are God’s son. You are God’s daughter. God’s child. With you God is well pleased. And we can step out in freedom and love. The heavens are open to us and for us.

So fear not. Our identity is secure. We are “name brand,” top of the line, watermarked by God’s love, compassion and grace.

What’s in a name? Well when your name is Christian, two things: Belonging and Purpose. Or in a word: Everything!

Amen.