

Ephesians 4:1-6

Matthew 16:13-20

March 11, 2018

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My father liked to tell corny jokes that would make you groan. They were so bad they were good. Before my mom and dad ever started dating, she knew him as her best friend's big brother. They all grew up together in the same church in New Orleans. My dad's best friend was a guy named Walter Shepard. He was the best man in their wedding. Mr. Shepard and his family spent many years in the Congo doing Presbyterian mission work. Mr. Shepard was an architect and school administrator.

My mom used to tell me about how my dad and Mr. Shepard would cut up at youth fellowship meetings and sometimes get in trouble because of their shenanigans. I liked it when the Gladdens and the Shepards would get together and my dad and Mr. Shepard would start cracking jokes and acting silly. Apparently they developed an act in high school based on Romeo and Juliet. I don't know which one played Romeo and which one played Juliet, but I can remember them acting it out for us kids, with falsetto voices and everything.

"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"

"I'm right here in the bushes — c'mon down!"

Of course, my dad and Mr. Shepard got the scene all wrong, but it was still funny! Juliet's not asking where Romeo is — she's asking, "Why do you have to be called Romeo?"

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love.

And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.

Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

What's a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,

Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part

Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other word would smell as sweet.

So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,

Retain that dear perfection which he owes

Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,

And for that name, which is no part of thee

Take all myself.

Of course, at that point, Romeo reveals himself and says to Juliet:

I take thee at thy word.

Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized.

Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

What's in a name? For Romeo and Juliet, their names made all the difference between living happily ever after or a tragic ending.

What's in a name? For those of us who are called by the name of Christ — “Christian” — the name should make quite a difference in how we live and act.

What's in a name? As I read this very important story from Matthew's gospel, I noticed how many names there are in eight verses: Jesus; the Son of Man; John the Baptist; Elijah; Jeremiah; Simon; Peter; the Christ; Messiah; the Son; the living God; Simon bar Jonah.

While Jesus was going into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is? What are people saying about me? What do they think of me?” The people don't get it right, but the names they call Jesus shouldn't be taken lightly. Elijah and Jeremiah were two of God's greatest prophets. When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching repentance, many people thought he was Elijah returning to herald the coming of the Messiah. Even to be considered one of God's true prophets was a great honor. Jesus was a great prophet, that's true, but he was so much more.

Then Jesus asked his disciples, “But y'all, who do y'all say that I am?” It's interesting that Jesus' question could be translated, “Who are y'all saying that I am?” In other words, when you're out and about, what are you saying about me? Or maybe Jesus is just asking them for their personal opinions, there in the privacy of their group as they walk along.

Jesus asks **the** question, then and now: Who do you say that I am? How we answer is just as important as how Simon Peter answered 2,000 years ago. Who do we say that Jesus is? A prophet? A great teacher? A compassionate man? A martyr? The Son of the living God? Lord and Savior? What name we call him says a lot about who we think he is.

Simon gave the right answer when he said, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus commended him and congratulated him on his answer, even as he rightly pointed out that such a confession of faith can only come through a revelation from God. Simon doesn't change Jesus' name when he speaks on behalf of all of the disciples. But, the names he uses matter — Christ, Messiah, Son of the living God.

By the same token, Jesus doesn't change Simon's name, but he does give him a nickname — “Rocky” — that designates Simon's role and, probably, changes his life going forward. You can't see it in the English, but Jesus is making his own pun, and it's

not a groaner. Indeed, it's very serious and life-changing for Simon. The Greek word for Peter is *Petros*; the Greek word for rock/stone is *petra*. "You are Rocky, and on this rock I will build my church." The pun would have been even more evident in Jesus' native language of Aramaic, in which the word for both Peter and rock is *Kepha*. That's why Peter is sometimes referred to as Cephas in the New Testament.

So, what's in a name? What's in the name or names we use to talk about Jesus? Who do we say that Jesus is? The gospels tell us he was named Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. The letters tell us God gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Christmas story tells us he will be called Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

When Simon confessed, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God," he got a new identity. He didn't quit being Simon, the Jewish fisherman from Galilee. But he did become Rocky, on whom Jesus would build his church. So, the question before Simon Peter became, how would he live into his new name?

David Lose, a Lutheran pastor and biblical scholar, writes a very helpful blog for preachers. He often includes suggestions about how to engage the congregation in the sermon. In his blog about Jesus asking "Who do you say that I am?" he wrote, "This Sunday, ask your people Jesus' question: Who do you say he is? Not just say when repeating the Creed, but say with your lives; that is, with your relationships, your bank account, your time, your energy, and all the rest. Who do you really say Jesus is?"

So, I'll take his suggestion and ask you (and myself), "Who do you say Jesus is?" Not just with your lips. Not just with the words of the Apostles' Creed. But in every aspect of your life.

David Lose also writes, "Because the thing is, I don't think Jesus asks us to confess who we believe he is for his sake, but rather for ours, that we might be caught up in the power of his love and life. Could we imagine preaching that? That the confessions we offer about Jesus in church and in our daily lives aren't finally words of praise to God but rather are words of power that help root us in the love and possibility that Jesus offers? No doubt it takes time for all this to sink in — Peter, again, is a wonderful example. But perhaps if we start this week, over time we'll sink deep into those words so that they shape every part of our lives."¹

When I baptize someone, I do so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Then I say, "Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." And so we get the name Christian — "a follower of Christ/Messiah." Acts 11:26 tells us, "and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" The footnote in my study Bible explains, "The giving of the name *Christians* indicates that outsiders see believers as a group that is somehow distinguished from other forms of Judaism."²

It's worth asking, what's in our name "Christian"? Does the giving of that name somehow distinguish us? Do our lives and actions confess what we believe about Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the living God as much or more than our words?

What's in a name? Jesus, Jesus, Jesus — there's just something about that name. Christian, Christian, Christian — there's just something about that name, also. How will we carry our new name into the world?

The Old Testament scholar and prolific author Walter Brueggemann wrote a poem called "Our Right Names." It speaks beautifully to what it means to name Jesus Messiah and to be named, in turn, as God's people.

*You God toward whom we pray and
about whom we sing, and
from whom we claim our very life.
In your presence, in our seasons of ache and yearning and honesty,
we know our right names.
In your presence we know ourselves to be aliens and strangers.
We gasp in recognition, taken by surprise at this disclosure,
because we had nearly settled in
and taken up residence in the wrong place.
For all of that, we turn out to be strangers,
unfamiliar with your covenant,
remote from your people,
at odds too much with sisters and brothers,
we aliens, with no hope
without promise
with very little sense of belonging or knowing
or risking or trusting.
It is in your presence that we come face to face with our beset,
beleaguered existence in the world.*

BUT

*You are the one who by your odd power
calls us by new names that we can
receive only from you and
relish only in your company.
You call us now,
citizens . . . with all the rights and privileges and
responsibilities pertaining to life in your commonwealth.
You call us now saints, not because we are good or gentle
or perfect,
but because you have spotted us and marked us
and claimed us for yourself and your purposes.
You call us members . . . and we dare imagine that we belong
and may finally come home.
So with daring and freedom,*

*we move from our old names known too well
to the new names you speak over us,
and in the very utterance we are transformed.
In the moment of utterance and transformation, we look past
ourselves and past our sisters and brothers here present.
And we notice so many other siblings broken, estranged, consumed
in rage and shame and loneliness,
much born of wretched economics.
We bid powerfully that you name afresh all your
creatures this day, even as you name us afresh.
We pray for nothing more and nothing less
than your name for us all,
utterly new, restored heaven and earth.
And we will take our new names with us when we leave this place,
treasuring them all day long,
citizen,
saint,
member,
even as we take with us the odd name of Jesus. Amen.³*

Let us pray: Come among us, living Lord. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, transform our hearts and minds so that we may recognize your presence, hear your voice, know your will, and walk in your way. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹David Lose, “Pentecost 11A: Who Do You Say That I Am?” August 18, 2014 at www.davidlose.net.

²Wayne A. Meeks, General Editor, *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version (With the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books)* (HarperCollins, 1993), p. 2080.

³Walter Brueggemann, “Our Right Names,” found online at “Hope — Our New Names,” December 5, 2010 by Rob Fairbanks at www.thedrum.typepad.com.