

Lexington Presbyterian Church
August 22, 2020
Sermon: "What's in a Name?"

ROCK shows us something that transcends the precariousness of our humanity: an absolute mode of being. Its strength, its motionlessness, its size, and its strange outlines are none of them human; they indicate the presence of something bigger than our selves. Mircea Eliade, a Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher, and professor at the University of Chicago.

Pastor John was getting ready to start worship service when it dawned on him that a rose was placed on the Lord's table to honor a new baby's birth! He quickly practiced the "tricky" first name Elias several times, because it was difficult for him to pronounce...He also went on to say Elias full name a few times through... "Elias Sylvan Smith". E-lie-as SILVAN

The service began, and it was time for Pastor John to SAY THE NAME during welcome and announcements. And then, as if his tongue became tied around his teeth, he mispronounced the baby's name and blundered desperately.

You could hear the congregation in the front of the church trying to help him, whispering loudly... Elias!! He finally blurted it out correctly only to brush over the middle and last name. His face was distressed, and you could feel his dismay and frustration. He hung in there, and he somehow managed to get the parent's name right and then the first names of the grandparents. And just when I thought he had made a full recovery, he gave the grandparents a NEW last name - Sullivan! A choir of "Smith," the correct name rang out from the church's front rows. John's body language shouted DEFEATED!!!! Having been there, I felt such empathy for him.

Baby, Elias was the grandchild of long-time members of the congregation, and pastor John had developed a deep relationship with the child's family, especially the grandparents. What is so sad about this story is that two weeks of separation and anger preceded the unfortunate event. The Smiths were deeply offended that pastor John didn't remember their NAMES...

During this period, the pastor apologized in person, through a letter, and then followed up with a phone call. Finally, Thanks to the good Lord and the persistence of Christian grace, the child's grandparents came to John, and the relationship was restored.

Names do mean something, don't they? Dale Carnegie states that "The sweetest sound in the world is the person's own name." This quote is found on the YouTube page, "Pronounce name.com." Maybe names are not just a way to tell things apart. Maybe our names mean so much more!!!

During my Hebrew studies, I recall how NAMES stood out in the Hebrew culture. In Old Testament times, a name stood for a person's "reputation, fame, and glory." Parents often gave children names that described the parent's hopes and future expectations regarding that child. The literal translation "name" in the Old Testament means "A mark or a branding." People's names were given for a reason. A study of Biblical names often reveals much about the person's personality or situation mentioned in the Bible. For instance: Abraham means "Father of a multitude." Israel means "may God prevail." Paul means "humbled."

Before the text, I read today, and after the text, Rev. Rascoe read last week - Jesus "SEEING" the need in the community and "FEELING" compassion heals many people and again, "CREATIVITY" feeds a multitude of people. The religious elite continues to not "SEE" Jesus's identity. They seek him out and try to "test" Jesus. Their "test" was seemingly insurmountable. They asked that Jesus "show them a sign from heaven," and in his beautifully cryptic way, he names them "BLIND." After all, by this time in Matthew's account, he has cured many, walked on water, calmed a storm, and fed "multitudes" with less than ample provisions, not once but twice. And then he follows up this encounter with a "warning" to his disciples about the religious elite. He tells them that "blindness" is obstructive and contagious.

Then we arrive at the scripture reading for today. Jesus asks the disciples a question. What is the word on the street, "who do people say that I am?" In other words, "what is my name?" He did not ask this question to receive understanding from his disciples concerning his identity. Jesus knew who he was and who he was serving.

Jesus was/is looking for more!!!

So, the disciples take a stab at the loaded question by giving him a list of names. And they respond, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." But there is no NAME in that...is there? They do not answer by stating who he is but describing who he resembles. In being compared to others, Jesus SEES something special is lost. He presses them further. He replies, No, "wait, who do YOU say that I am."

I imagine a long pregnant pause here – deafen silence. Do you remember the TV show Welcome Back Carter? In this scene, I believe Simon Peter is like Arnold Horseshack, the eager student who rose his hand, exclaiming, "ooh, ooh, ooh, I KNOW, I know, I know." Like Arnold, it is as if Simon Peter has an "ah-ha" moment and, in a moment of clarity, puts his journey with Jesus together, and he states, "You are THE Christos, the son of the living God."

The Christos, in the Greek, means "the anointed one," or the Messiah." The one who has come to save or liberate a group of people. To rule Israel's united tribes and herald the Messianic Age of global peace, also known as the "kingdom to come." Peter makes a "holy confession" calling Jesus by a NEW name - Messiah.

What is more, is that in the very next verse, after Simon Peter's profession of faith in the Messiah. The Messiah calls Simon Peter, BLESSED, SON of JONAH, and gives him a new NAME.

The very God who re-named Abram - Abraham, Jacob - Israel, and Saul-Paul, gives Simon a new name, and it is "Petros" – literally meaning a single detached ROCK!!! And Jesus goes on to tell Petros what the "blessed name" means lived out.

"You, Petros, will be the "rock" on which I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will NOT prevail." I posit that the NAME "Rock" is a metaphor for Simon Peter's confession of faith in the Messiah. Without fully understanding the implications, yet - Petros' confession of faith was birthing something bigger than himself.

Isn't it like that in all the "RE-NAMING" moments of the Bible? Simone, literally means "who has heard" is now...Peter, "ROCK," a "single detached" rock of faith, is the first stone, the first of many "living stones" that make up the church of Jesus Christ.

What a job clarification! It is one thing to know that you are a part of Christ's body; it is entirely another to understand what your purpose is in serving that body. Through this proclamation of faith, Petros's job description was clear.

So, what's in your name????

Typically, we use names to identify, and usually, we do not qualify people by their name in our culture. For instance, when I apply for a job, the application doesn't ask, "what does your name mean?" Maybe it should? My name is Kelly-Ann. Kelly means "warrior," "aggressive," or "defender of ALL, and Ann means "grace." This might be GOOD information for the person hiring, don't you think?

Do names matter to you? How about when you see a name tag, do you try to visualize and see if the name matches the person. Maybe not most of the time, but what about a name like "JOY?" Gosh, what a name to try to live up to. One grumpy day from Ms. JOY and everyone jumps to judgment. Or how about GRACE!? I am happy my name means warrior, and my hyphenated name downplays grace!! At least I can carry a spiritual sword and have a bad day!!

Your name...

Do you even think about it? Have you ever looked it up? Have you asked your parents why they gave you your name? Were you named after someone special? Were you named on behalf of a particular person in your family or specific memory of your parents? Were you named just because your mom and dad liked the name? I imagine most people know why they have the name they have. Do you appreciate your name? Do you embrace your parent's gift to you? Do you think God had a hand

in your naming? No matter how you feel about your name, like Elias and his grandparent, your "identification" is important. Your name is beautiful because it is YOURS!!!

And yet, there is still another name...

Petros, "Rock" started a faith journey for all of us, didn't he?? If you have identified Christ as "Messiah," you are named "Child of living God" and have been "BLESSED" to carry the NAME, Christian. In that NAME, each of us becomes a "living stone," with a purpose. A "living stone" to set upon the foundation of the church, PETER'S FAITH.

In 1st Peter, Peter proclaims, "you yourselves are like living stones, which are being built into a spiritual house[a] to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." His proclamation of our chosen-ness is AWESOME. Therefore, the honor and responsibility given to Peter is ours as well!

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he urges that we are a body of believers, "stones" within the church and that we are ALL members in one BODY, with different functions "different names if you will" – all contributing to something worthy – the immovable rock of CHRIST. Paul tells us we have "tangible gifts." As we utilize the gifts assigned to us in Christ, we will develop our capacity of faith and live a life of joy, love, peace, and hope in the midst of whatever comes our way.

So let's visualize a "living stone," what does that look like to you?
Who does GOD name you "to be" in Christ?

We can undoubtedly hit the pause button and play the game of contrasting that with who you might believe the world says you are? Wounded, outcast, lonely, afraid, guilty, dumb, stupid, irresponsible, selfish, BAD!!! Sometimes we can be those things; for instance, Christ himself called Peter "Satan" only a few verses beyond the text I read today, but that is not the claim of our name in Christ, is it!

When Jesus encounters a woman whose bleeding condition has named her "unclean" and "outcast." Jesus re-names her "daughter," and says that she is "a child of Abraham," which means that she belongs. Many of us bear a name -- not literally -- that diminishes, distorts, or disfigures us. These names may be secret ones, known only to us.

BUT and YES.... in the Christian claim, OUR WEAKNESS CAN BE MADE INTO CONCRETE...just like Petros/"ROCK" eventually lives up to. In the name of Christ, God has a new name for you. It is a name like healed, humble, confident, favored, joyful, overcoming one, forgiven, beloved, beautiful, holy, treasured. MADAM patience or MR provider!!! Our God is in the business of name change, heart surgery, and healing our deepest wounds.

So, I ask you, what are you calling yourself today?

I would love for all of us to think about what God honestly whispers in our precious ears. "When you know me by name, I will reveal who you are by name." If you don't know, ask God. God, who came and lived among us in Jesus, so that we would know OUR God-given Name."

My beloved friends,

We are called "Christian"! We stand on the foundation of many "living stones" who have gone before. Saints who have contributed to the church of Christ. So, what is your "living" contribution to the foundation of our faith? I pray that we all can find that precious insight because our faith will be strengthened and resolved when we know who we are in Christ and how we can contribute our gifts to the Kingdom here on earth!

One day, long ago, SIMON Peter placed his "living stone" marked "ROCK" on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ...and became a great proclaimer of the FAITH in Christ, the Messiah! In our CHRISTIAN inheritance, we "get to" do the same!!!

And just like Petros, we fail; the church fails -- often -- to live out the full measure of faithfulness. Yet, deep down, beneath the lowest level of the foundation, somewhere, in the cool and fertile darkness, that transcends our humanity's instability, there is ROCK. Always and always - Amen!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for Peter! Thank you that he was so very human, and yet you graced him with faith to confess Jesus as your Son and Messiah. As you used him, we ask that you would also use us, to do your work of forgiving, confessing, and proclaiming Jesus as Lord to a disbelieving world.