

Wesley United Methodist Church
January 15, 2017

Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 139

John 1:29-42

Title: Know Your Name

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When we meet someone new, typically the first piece of information we share is our name. Our names set us apart as a unique person and quite likely our parents spent a good amount of time deciding upon the perfect name for us. In some cases, our name may have been chosen to honor a family member or someone important in the lives of our parents. Sometimes the name might have been one that they particularly liked. There are many reasons why a specific name was chosen for us – maybe you know what it was in your case, or maybe you don't. Either way, your name is an important piece of information about who you are.

I spent some time this week going through the membership lists of this church. Some names were new to me and didn't really tell me much except that the person is someone I do not yet know. Other names brought back memories; some had me wondering where a person is now, and others had me trying to recall family connections.

Our names do more than just give us an external identification. Our names carry with them memories, attributes and many other things that come to mind when our name is mentioned. Most of us may be called by more than one name depending upon who is talking to us. I am Beverly, Bev, Pastor Bev or Pastor Beverly, Reverend Stenmark, Mom, Aunt Bev, Nana, and Grandma just to mention some of the most obvious ones. Each of those names carries with it special connotations, and may define relationships or roles.

In the reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning we heard the words, “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.” While God didn’t give us our legal name, God did give each of us a name, “Child of God.” That name helps identify who we are – and is really the most basic of all of our names.

Who we are really at the deepest level becomes an expression of whose we are. If we believe and accept that we are a child of God then we want to live and act in ways that express that identity. As a child growing up it was clear to me that I was a Briden and with that came certain expectations of how I would behave. Think of the expectations that came along with your last name. Think about some of the famous names we hear and what we might expect when we think about the children named Rockefeller, Bush, Clinton, Obama, Trump. We probably have expectations and assumptions of what we would expect from Malia, Sasha, Ivanka, Donald Jr, and Eric based upon the family whose name they carry.

What does it mean to us to be named, “Child of God”? What can or should people expect of us because of that?

In our Gospel today, we find a lot of names and they all carry meaning with them. First we heard John’s account of Jesus’ baptism. You may or may not know that the name Jesus means “to rescue or to deliver”. That is why during Advent we read in Matthew’s gospel, the angel telling Joseph that the baby to be born is to be named “Jesus” because “he will save his people from their sins.” Later in that passage we also hear that he is to be called “Emmanuel which means, ‘God is with us’.” In Biblical thought, a name said something significant about the nature and character of a person and those names need to be translated for us so that we know what the name means.

In today's Gospel, when John the Baptizer talks about Jesus, three times he calls him "The Lamb of God." Remember that the Jewish people were looking for a Messiah – which means Anointed. They expected and hoped for someone who would rescue Israel from Roman rule. If they were paying attention, the name used here, "Lamb of God" would have left people confused. This refers to the sacrificial lamb from the Passover remembrance. Rather than coming as a warrior, or king, Jesus has come as the one who will be a sacrifice. His life and ministry will not be about force or violence but about something very different. The Isaiah passage is one of several called the "Servant Songs" – and when connected with Jesus they, again, tell us something very important about how Jesus would live his life. A servant, not a man exercising great power or control over others. Elsewhere in this Gospel reading Jesus is also called, "Son of God", "Messiah" and "Rabbi" or teacher.

As people tried to understand who this special person was, many names were applied to Jesus, names that helped describe who he was, how they experienced him. When we are trying to describe someone we use many different words or names to help describe the person. We may describe the person physically, but often we describe characteristics of the person – things that help others understand who they are.

In the second part of the Gospel reading, Andrew one of John's disciples, follows Jesus and then goes to find his brother Simon to bring him to meet Jesus. Jesus said to him, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). In the Bible, we often see a person's name changed. The change is not merely a matter of convenience but rather it is an important shift in a person's essential nature. Simon's new name – Peter or Cephas, means rock, sturdy, tough,

dependable. Later in Matthew's Gospel (16:18), Jesus will say to him, "You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church."

You can see that in the Bible, names held great significance and said something important about who the person was. Our given names may not seem to have that same kind of meaning for us but when we expand that to include the ways we are known or described then our names become even more important.

Remember that our basic and first name – given to us before we were born – is "child of God." That is a name that we did not choose, but a name given to all persons. The fact that you are here today, likely also means that you carry the name "Christian" – a name you chose when you decided to be a follower of Jesus. Is that a name that you proudly claim or one that you try to keep quiet? What does that name mean to you?

In our culture the name "Christian" is loaded with assumptions and some of the ones I hear most loudly are ones that I want to immediately disavow. When I encounter people who assume that they apply to me because I am a Christian and a pastor, I want to tell them that this is a case of mistaken identity.

That's why it is important for us to know our name – and to know what it means to us. Knowing this helps us be true to who we are, rather than letting someone else define us. During the next few weeks, we will be going deeper into Matthew's Gospel and particularly as we explore Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we will see more of what Jesus taught and what Jesus thought was important. These continue to be important ways for us to know how Jesus expected his followers to live.

One of the other names that most of us carry is United Methodist and that, too, can be an important descriptor of who we are. One of the things I

cherish most about being a Methodist is a guideline that John Wesley followed. Quite simply it is, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” This allows us to agree about the things that are essential if we are to be called Christian or Methodist, but also recognizes that there are many things about which we may disagree. Most importantly, it also means that in our disagreements we still respect each other; we can love each other even if, and when, we disagree.

How do you want to be known? What descriptors do you want people to use when they describe you? Sometimes it can be important for us to think about how the way we want to be known fits with the way we are actually described, and how that compares to the way God wants us to be described – who God calls us to be. We are not always going to live up to who God calls us to be but the good news is that God loves us and always accepts us and helps us find our way back.

Simon had a very clear message from Jesus about who he was to be, Cephas, Peter - the Rock. Yet, even Peter did not always live up to God’s call. Remember that Peter is the one who the night that Jesus was betrayed denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was. Yet, even then Peter was loved and chosen by God.

I would invite each of us, this week, to spend some time thinking about how we hope that people describe us and as much as is possible, examine ourselves to see if that is who we are. Are those names that would be applied to us?

I would invite us to think about who God calls us to be. What did Jesus think was important? When we claim the name Christian – what does it mean to us?

Know your name. Know whose you are and what it means when God calls you by name.