

September 6, 2015

“What’s In A Name?”

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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

What’s In a Name?

As Presbyterians we have long valued education. There are 58 Presbyterian Colleges, all created to access the Word of God. As John Calvin, founder of Presbyterianism says, we are to grow in knowledge of God and in knowledge of self. How? By using “spectacles”, the spectacles being scripture to envision and interpret all that was, is, and will be. Thus the ability to read is critical, as is the need to study the Bible as God’s Word to us all, as necessary as breath is to life.

Remember Moses? He first met God in a burning bush that refused to burn up. So he stopped to look, as burning bushes that would not be consumed are not an everyday sight. Out of the bush came a voice demanding he take off his shoes, as he was now standing on holy ground. The same voice saying God chose him to call God’s people out of Egypt. To which Moses responded, “And whom shall I tell them that you are?” God answered, “I am who I am”. Notice God is not past tense or future tense but always now. For our God refuses to be named.

Yet humanity’s struggle to know God’s name as identity as well as our own is longer than written history. Even today, especially in these troubled times, we too struggle to know who God is and who we are.

Well the idea of naming something as a way to control it is older than written history. Naming someone or something to gain power over it is common in fairy tales, mythology and legends. In contrast, God’s name, “I am who I am” leaves us without a way to control God. God cannot be managed any more than we can direct the wind to blow this way or that.

Yet it is our nature to want to control our environment as well as self and others. We are trained to play our cards “close to the vest” like contract bridge and high-stakes poker players - determined to win. Losing is not an option, as our culture teaches us losing defines and directs us in ways we do not want to go.

Now this idea of naming as identity comes up in many current movies and TV shows, like the fairy tale “In the Woods” or the movie “Thor” or stories about Superman, the Hulk, Captain America, Iron Man, and Spiderman. The idea is to hide their identity so enemies may not gain power over them. Instead, who they are is revealed by what they do. The saying from Proverbs that “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold” is as true now as then. Actions do speak louder than words.

Maybe that's what James is saying. That those who claim faith in God need to act out their faith instead of talking about it. Maybe, as James says, faith without works is not faith at all. The power of our name comes from our life with God, revealed through our deeds to others. The spectacles of scripture reveal this truth from early days.

The spectacle of scripture are as usable on the Old Testament as in the New. In the former we meet heroes like Daniel in the lion's den, Samson destroying the enemies palace, Judith and Esther using cunning and stealth to rid the people of their enemies; and Jacob forgiving his treacherous older brothers. All these stories reveal who they are. Their deeds became their name, as our deeds become ours.

What's in a name? As Christ's body, our actions help us live into our gifts and calling from God. By deepening our knowledge of who God is - in scripture, prayer and church community - we find direction and courage to act. Still, sometimes the way is unclear. Sometimes we may wonder what to do and where to begin.

What if our feet might show us the way? When asked this question, Frederick Buechner replied that we need to watch where our feet take us. For where our feet take us is where we are, and who we become.

There is an old song that asks the same question, one many here may remember. James Taylor sings about where our feet take us in his song “Country Road”. It goes like this, “Take to the highway, won't you lend me your name? Your way and my way seem to be one the same. Mama don't understand it. She wants to know

where I been. I'd have to be some kind a natural born fool to want to pass that way again, but you know I can feel it, walking on a country road.”

For we know that sometimes, we will make some missteps. There will be times in past, present and future that our feet take us to a place we do not want to return to again. At the same time, we remember Apostle Paul saying he could not always do what he knew he should or stop from doing what he knew he should not. We are the same. We too may not get it right every day, and are comforted by the same gifts of grace and forgiveness.

Well, whether our feet have taken us where we want to go or taken us to places we never want to go again, Jesus knows the way. His way and our way are meant to be one and the same. With Jesus as map and compass, our feet know where they want us to go, walking down a faithful road.