
What is Your Name?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 22 – Year A

From the words of Saint Paul, *“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* (Philippians 3:4-6).

I remember, over thirty years ago, when my wife and I began to discuss names for our children. We had a child, and then another, and then another! As you know, part of the routine during each of those nine months is to discuss what we would name the child.

It was important. It was fun. How do we name our children? Do we reach back into the names of old ancestors? Do we reach back into family lore? Do we name the child for a relative that we especially adored, no matter how strange the name is, and no matter how out-of-date the name seems now?

And everyone names children differently. Some of us are named, not for any of our ancestors or family, but for the best friends of our parents. My great-great-grandfather, for instance, was trying so hard to earn the favor of his father-in-law, that he named his first-born son, not for himself, but for his mother’s father. I am not sure that happens anywhere anymore!

Some of us manufacture new names entirely. We make up beautiful-sounding syllables. And, voila, we have an entirely new name, matching the uniqueness of our child. There will be no one else in our child’s first grade class with that same name!

When we are children ourselves, we live with those names, and sometimes fitfully. But when we begin to grow up and grow older, we get back at our parents. We begin to take charge of our own names. We tell our parents, I do not want that name after all. Instead of “Samuel,” I want to be called “Sammy” or something like that. Or, instead of “Sammy,” I want to be called “Samuel.”

Then, we begin to claim other titles, and we create other ways to be known. We want to be known as the best athlete or the best-looking. We become known as the person who went to this school or to that school. We got this degree or that degree; and now, perhaps, our name includes a long list of obtuse letters after our name.

We are justifiably proud of these names. We are justifiably proud of those letters. We earned them, and they do certify us, in a way, for service in the world! In fact, we become justifiably proud of our names. We want to learn more about our ancestors, and we become proud of them.

We begin to live into our titles with respect and with honorable pride. They are good ways that we engage and serve the world. We want to live up to our names.

But then we get to church. Then we get to church, and we hear these self-reflective words of Saint Paul. You remember Saint Paul, who gets both credit and blame for setting out and organizing the first Christian churches, those churches

which would become the foundation for our own church today.

Saint Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, turns out to have accumulated a lot of names himself. Listen to how he describes himself

Hey, he says, if anyone has reason to be proud of heritage and ancestry and upbringing, I sure do. I went through the right ritual at eight days old – I was circumcised properly, he says. I am a certified member of the tribe of Israel, I am a Hebrew through and through. In fact, I am of the special tribe of Benjamin – my family is one of the more important ones.

As far as education goes, he says, I studied law at the greatest school, the school of the Pharisees. As for energy and commitment, I have a great case history of successful persecutions. In fact, he claims, in many ways of conventional righteousness, I am blameless.

Paul is as justifiably proud of his name, and his history, and his accomplishments, as any one of us here today. But, then, he says something different.

He says, “You know, whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:7-8).

Really?

Is there something else in this world besides our family, our history, our education, our accomplishments? Is there something else in this world besides our very name?

Yes, says Paul. And, yes, we say here in the Church. That something else is the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus.

No matter what our names are, and no matter what special names our parents gave us, no matter what kind of name we have made for ourselves since our birth, we—here in the Church—have taken on another name. When we are baptized, we are given another name. We are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, we are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The point is that baptism gives us another name. Now, baptism does not make us complete all at once. Baptism does not make us perfect. But baptism sets us on a new journey, to live into the name of Christ, to live into the name of Christian.

Saint Paul, in his self-revelation, admits that he has not reached his goal yet. But he says he “presses on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

When we baptize these special people in a few minutes, we will be giving them a new name, the name of Christian. And we are also here this morning to remember that name for all the rest of us who are Christians. When we remind ourselves of our true name, we set ourselves back on the path towards wholeness in Christ.

Now, I know, as well as all the rest of you do, that even the name “Christian” is not a magic name. It does not solve everything, and it does not make everything okay. People with the name “Christian” have done great things in the world, but people with the name “Christian” have also done evil and atrocious things. That name doesn’t magically justify everything.

What that name does is set us on our way. That title, “Christian,” names our journey, our path, our way. We begin a commitment to follow the way of Christ. That is why even Saint Paul, in his mature age, speaking to the Philippians, realizes that he has not made that path fully his own yet. He is merely on the way, pressing onwards and upwards.

In that journey, that journey into Christ, we need each other. We need the history of good Christian thought and practice, we need reminders and encouragement. We need grace and right relationship. In short, we need community to grow into Christ. We need Christian community to grow into Christ.

Ah! Consider all our names, gathered here today. We are from old families and new ones. We are educated here and there, and everywhere. We have familiar names and intriguing new ones. But we are gathered today under one name, the name of Jesus Christ. And we are gathered today in one name, the name “Christian” which set us on a particular way. We walk the way of Christ, the way of life and healing, and grace and truth.

“Let us go forth in the name of Christ!
Thanks be to God!”

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