

January 16, 2005
John 1:35-42
First Parish Church
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What's in a Name?

A few years ago, in a confirmation class, I realized that, when you say *Martin Luther* to young people today, they think you are talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King is the Martin Luther they know of and have probably heard about again this past week in preparation for tomorrow's holiday.

When M.L., as Dr. King's family called him, was little he probably first realized that he was named for his father, MLK, Sr.

However, since he was growing up in a preacher's family, it was probably not long before he learned that they both shared a name with the great Protestant reformer of the 16th century, Martin Luther. That Martin Luther was a Catholic priest, who was protesting the abuses of the church when he tacked his 95 theses on the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg. That protest turned the tide of church history in ways I'm sure he never anticipated.

When Martin Luther King returned to Alabama, after doing graduate work in Boston, to be the pastor of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, I'm sure he never dreamed how his life would become engaged in a modern -day reformation that would turn the tide of church and U.S. history.

A name can be a powerful thing. How interesting those two great reformers shared a name!

Let's consider a more common name. If I say the name "Dennis" some of you may think of a particular friend or acquaintance. However, I suspect most of us think of

"Dennis the Menace." For those of us who have grown up in American culture the name has become identified with the comic strip.

The character himself reminds us of the significance of names, when in one of the comics he comes walking through the door and says to his parents, "It's a good thing you guys named me Dennis, because that's what everybody calls me."

Don't you love his line of thinking? For him it's almost magical that his parents and the world somehow agreed to call him by the same name. There is a sense of security for him in that. All's right with the world and he is Dennis.

Our names are important to us. It is disconcerting when the world or even just one person calls you by the wrong name. Entering a new congregation has reminded me of this more than once. I stopped counting how many people I've called by the wrong name. My favorite was a number of weeks ago when Jonathan St. Mary, a member of the choir, came out of church and I called him Joe, because that's what his nametag said. Turns out he was wearing Joe's choir robe that day. Oh well, *now* I know who he is.

In today's gospel reading there is a focus on names. For a moment, let's begin at the end of the reading, where Jesus says to Simon, *You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas*" (which is translated Peter.) What the text doesn't make clear to us is that in Aramaic *Cephas* means "rock." There is a wonderful irony in this naming of Simon

Peter, because, looking back, we know Peter is a rock in so many ways. Sometimes he is dense, stubborn, and stuck in his ways, and at other times, he is solid, courageous, and a foundation on which to build the community of faith.

This is an example of how our names are more than just simple classifications for identification. They become metaphors for our lives.

Today is the second Sunday of Epiphany. Epiphany means to be made known, to be named if you will. It is the season when we celebrate Jesus being made known to the world. Interestingly enough, in the Middle Ages until earlier in this century, this second Sunday of Epiphany was celebrated as the Feast of the Name of Jesus.

So what's in Jesus' name? Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew word, *Joshua*, which means "Yahweh saves." God saves. It's a name packed with layers and layers of meaning and tradition. This winter and spring, Larry is leading a discussion group for local clergy to help us reflect on what it means to say, "Jesus saves."

When the early believers were trying to tell others about Jesus, you would think it might have been enough to just say his name. However, it was a fairly common name in that time. So the gospels use many names, many metaphors, to help us catch glimpses of how Jesus embodied the presence of God. We see this especially in the gospel of John. John is not primarily about the historical life of Jesus; rather it is about revealing the true identity of Jesus, about naming Jesus.

Some of the names for Jesus we find in John's gospel are: light of the world, bread of life, living water. All of these are rich metaphors, which do exactly what metaphors do by connecting the unfamiliar (Jesus) by means of similarities to what is familiar (light, bread, water.)

In today's reading from John, we encounter three other names for Jesus:

Lamb of God, Rabbi, and Messiah.

The first metaphor, Lamb of God, is unique to John's Gospel. Although it is not part of our contemporary every-day language for Jesus, it would have quickly grabbed the attention of Jewish listeners of the day. It is an image that reverberates to the core of Jewish life and resounds all the way back to the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt, in the Exodus experience. It was the blood of the lamb that saved the people at the Passover. The Lamb of God is an image of deliverance, of liberation, from what holds us in bondage.

The next name, Rabbi, is an image, with which most of us are probably more familiar, and I suspect an image with which we are more comfortable. Although Jesus was not formally trained as a rabbi, those around him had experienced his existential authority as Teacher, which as the text is careful to point out is what rabbi means. Jesus opened the scriptures to them and taught them the ways of God.

Generally, the Protestant traditions have valued the image of rabbi. In the UCC, for example, the ordination vows we take are to be Pastor and Teacher. In fact as I have been perusing some of the articles Mildred Jones has written about the history of First Parish, I discovered that at one time, when a new minister came here to FP, there were two votes for the same person— one to accept that person as pastor and one to accept that person as teacher. There were also two different compensations listed. If I read it correctly, the minister got paid more for being the teacher.

The third name for Jesus in today's text is Messiah. Again the text is careful to tell us the translation for this word, which is anointed. In Greek it is translated Christ, which is the word with which we are most

familiar. This name reminds how complicated it is to live in a tradition that has two root languages, Hebrew and Greek, and then we speak in English. There are often layers and layers of meaning with one word, like Messiah - Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Anointed. At its root, the word anointed means a person invested by God with special powers and functions. For the Jewish people of Jesus' day the strongest resonance for this image was probably with the image of the king who was anointed, especially King David. The gospel writer is effectively saying, see this is Jesus; he is God's anointed, in the line of the great King David. He is the leader of his people. Ah, but he leads in a most unexpected way.

And so we see in this one gospel reading, where John names Jesus as Lamb of God, Rabbi, and Messiah, that John is making strong connections with the religious heritage of the people, in ways that reverberate with their heartstrings.

The question is what names for Jesus touch our souls? For those of us who have grown up in the church, many of the traditional names speak to us. However, if we are trying to communicate with someone who doesn't know of Jesus, what images, what names will resonate with our experiences and connect with theirs? – healer, guide, revolutionary, guru, reformer, for those in sports, maybe “coach,” for those in 12 step programs, maybe “sponsor.” Someone once suggested to me in the realm of the computer world, Jesus is the “software.”

Some of these possible images may ring true for you; some may make you cringe, like the sound of fingernails across a blackboard. However we react, reflection on contemporary images is a crucial endeavor of faith.

Many of our biblical and traditional images arise from a different worldview and

experience. The religious language we use can be confusing to those for whom it is unfamiliar. We are reminded of this from our own children's misunderstandings. For instance, the little boy who brought to his mother a picture of God and said, “This is God. His name is Art.” The mother, being confused, asked for clarification. The little boy responded, “You know, Our Father, who is Art in Heaven.”

I am not suggesting we ignore the images that have been passed on to us, for they convey a powerful witness. Yet, in the tradition of the gospel writers, we also need to use images that speak to the real life experiences of the people around us, just as the gospel writers spoke to the experiences of their contemporaries.

One name that speaks to me is Jesus as Companion. A companion journeys with you – through good and bad. A good companion tells you the truth. A companion sits at table with you and breaks bread with you. In fact the word “companion” means, literally, “together at bread.” Companions share the journey and the cost and the joy of discipleship.

So what's in a name? Do names, images, metaphors, really matter? Despite Juliet's (from *Romeo and Juliet*) protests to the contrary, names do matter. They are not just words. At the same time, we need to remind us that any one word cannot contain the mystery of the holy. If we claim only one name for Jesus or God, that name becomes an idol. So we bring many names. These images we hold dear guide our lives. They direct our sense of mission. They create who we are and how we live our lives.

How do you name Jesus?

