

Date: April 24, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Easter 5

**SERMON: What's In a Name?**

Text(s): 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

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Several months ago, before we found out that our first grandchild is going to be a grandson, we were having fun with our daughter and son-in-law thinking of possible names. Most of you have been through such discussions too. Sometimes you get silly and see who can come up with the most ridiculous or outlandish name. I suggested the biblical name found in the Book of Isaiah, *Mahershalalhashbaz*. But we couldn't come up with a good nickname for that one, so that didn't make the cut.

In our family's case, it needed to be a name that honored our son-in-law's Colombian origins, so we couldn't pick a common American name like Tiffany or Sean. And it had to be a name that sounded good in both English and Spanish, and that we could imagine ourselves saying and hearing with pleasure, so that eliminated some other possibilities. And it had to have the possibility of a nickname or diminutive that worked in both languages. We also had to consider whether there were family members whose name could be carried on and also meet the other criteria for acceptability in both languages and cultures.

Eventually, the discussions settled on one possibility for a girl and one for a boy. And when the sonogram showed that it was going to be a boy, from that point on, we've been referring to him by the name our daughter and son-in-law have chosen— Santiago Thomas. Little "Santi" which is the diminutive for Santiago, will make his official debut in a few weeks, but already, to us, he has an identity, a name. He's a real person.

The name game is one that the human race has been playing since the beginning. In the story of creation in Genesis, God creates Adam and gives him the task of naming all of the rest of creation. Naming is one of the most fundamental

of all human activities. And we have never stopped doing it. We constantly name things and people.

What's the big deal about names and naming? Is there any real significance in a name? Shakespeare posed that question in *Romeo and Juliet*. In Juliet's soliloquy she asks, "What's in a name? A rose, by any other would smell as sweet." And of course, on one level she's exactly right; it's not her logic that is faulty. If a rose were named a skunk cabbage, it *would* still smell as sweet. But as the play tragically drives home, names are incredibly important, and the fates, not only of the two star-crossed lovers but the fates of their families as well come to grief because of the emotional and historical freight carried by their names.

Naming is the way in which we order the world. To give something a name is the way we assign it its place in the universe and distinguish it from everything else. Naming someone or something is an act that has great power in it. To name something, is in a sense, to give it existence, to admit it into our reality. That power can be a power for great good or great evil. Naming another person as friend helps to create and cement a bond of affection and caring. The name "Mother" certainly carries a great deal of emotive power, doesn't it? Certainly the florists and greeting card companies know that it does. Next to Christmas, "Mother's Day" is the largest gift-giving and card-buying day of the year. On second thought, some of that power may not be so positive; perhaps it's guilt as well as affection that motivates some of that gift-buying for Mother's Day.

We try to protect our children when they're young and have been hurt by one of their schoolmates who has called them a nasty name. We recite the old rhyme to them, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But of course, they do hurt; they hurt a great deal, and sticks and stones do a lot less damage than a cruel name. If you saw the movie "Hotel Rwanda," when it was playing here recently, you will remember that the Hutu

leadership of Rwanda named all Tutsis “cockroaches,” and within the space of three months, a million or more “cockroaches” were massacred. Naming creates reality. There is a correspondence between naming someone or something and the presence of that person or thing. To name someone, in a very real sense, calls that person's presence into our midst.

That correspondence between name and presence, between naming and the reality that is created underlies the so-called “Farewell Discourse” of Jesus in John’s gospel, of which our gospel lesson today is the beginning. It may help us to make more sense of this text if we understand John’s technique. He tells us stories about Jesus and his disciples and their friends and opponents, but whenever Jesus speaks in this gospel, it is always the already-crucified-risen-and ascended Jesus rather than the man from Nazareth whose words we hear. This is what gives John’s gospel its strange and mystical feeling compared with the other gospels which are more straightforward narratives. In this gospel, eternity and time weave in and out in an almost seamless manner. John has taken the simple story of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples and expanded it into a five-chapter scene, most of which is in the form of an extended discourse of Jesus in which ostensibly he is preparing his disciples for what life will be like for them when he is no longer physically present. But John’s real target audience is the disciples of all succeeding generations for whom that question will be even more important and pressing. The question of who Jesus is for us, and where he is to be found, and how we may be with him—this is the real issue John is dealing with in this extended five-chapter discourse.

In today’s lesson, Jesus speaks to reassure his disciples who are greatly distressed because he has told them that he is going away, and that they will see him no more. He tells them, *“In my Father's house are many dwelling places. . . I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare*

*a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”*

It’s tempting to hear those words as a promise of heaven or an afterlife, a place beyond history and beyond the world where Jesus’ followers will one day go to join him after their own deaths. That’s why it’s frequently chosen as a text to be read at funerals. It seems to offer some comfort. But John doesn’t appear to be concerned about the question of what happens to us after death. In the exchange with his disciples which follows this statement, Jesus makes it fairly clear that he's speaking of the way in which his disciples will continue to have access to him when he is no longer with them in the flesh—how he will be present to them in their daily lives here-and-now.

And that, for most of us, I suspect, is the more pressing question. How can we know and experience the presence of Jesus in this life? Is it possible? How do we know where Jesus is or how do we recognize him when we encounter him? Is our only hope one that promises us pie-in-the-sky-bye-and-bye in some future life? Or can we know the presence of the risen Christ in the dailiness of our lives?

It is that question which Jesus is answering here. When Philip complains that they don’t know where he is going nor do they know the way, he assures them that they do know the way to God—that he himself is the way. *“You do know where I am going,”* he tells them, *“and you know the way to get there. I am the way and the truth and the life. You can’t get there except through me.”* That statement has so often been misinterpreted to mean that there is no possibility of salvation apart from Christianity. It’s a statement that’s been used to assert that only through a conscious acceptance of Jesus as Savior can anyone find salvation. But such an interpretation flies in the very face of what is actually going on here. This is not a statement addressed not to everyone in the world, but

specifically to those who are already followers of Jesus—to disciples. It's not about the possibility or impossibility of salvation through other religions or other saviors. It's about how Jesus' followers, those whom he has named as his own, those who bear Jesus' name, can know and experience Jesus' presence here and now.

He promises them that here and now, they will do the works that he himself has done, and greater works. In fact, he tells them, *"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me for anything in my name, I will do it."*

What is John's point? Simply this: Wherever the community of Jesus' disciples gather in his name, wherever a group of people name the name of Jesus as their own name, that is the place where Jesus is, and that is the place where his disciples may be with him. Wherever Jesus' disciples gather in his name, they will do the works that Jesus did, and greater works. How greater? Because while Jesus was in the flesh, he was limited by space and time in a human body just as we are. He could only be in one place at one time. Now that he is risen and ascended, he is no longer limited by space and time. Jesus is everywhere present in the body of his followers. This is John's understanding of the church. This is the down-to-earth meaning of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Jesus is now present wherever a community of people are gathered in his name and doing his works. Or as St. Matthew put it very plainly and succinctly, *"Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am."* (MATTHEW 18:20)

The answer to his disciples' anxious question, "We don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way there?" is incredibly simple, yet stunningly profound. In effect, Jesus is saying, "I'm going wherever you, as a community gathered in my name, are going. That's where I'll be. In your life together, I'll be present. In the works you do in my name, I'll be at work."

This is a truth which is almost beyond our powers to grasp. It is certainly beyond the experience of many Christians and much of what passes for organized Christianity. We tend to think of Christianity as a set of religious beliefs or doctrines or a list of moral rules or as an organized institution. For many of us, the term "church" is synonymous with church buildings or committees and budgets and meetings. But in reality, Christianity is nothing other than the Risen Christ present and working through the community of his disciples.

We know this if we'd only think about it. The long tradition of ending our prayers with phrases like "In Jesus' name, we pray. . ." or "Through Jesus Christ our Lord. . ." is a testimony to our recognition that whenever we gather in Jesus' name, in some very real, though mysterious sense, we are collectively the body of Jesus, and Jesus is present in the place where he is named.

But knowing our name and internalizing it so that it transforms us are two different things. We may recognize the laws of aerodynamics and marvel at the sight of an airplane, but until we get into an airplane and allow it to carry us up into the sky, we will never experience the actuality of those aerodynamic laws.

So when we come together as disciples of Jesus our experience of Jesus' presence will remain an unrealized abstraction unless we actually begin to name ourselves as that place where Jesus is, and allow the power of that act of naming to enable us to do the works of Jesus and even greater works because we know that we are bound together in one body—the body of Christ. We live, we work, we pray, we sing, we hope in Jesus' name. We are the place of the name, the place where Jesus is.

Sam Shoemaker, who for many years was rector of one of the largest Episcopal churches in Pittsburgh, and one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest Christians, wrote a poem exploring what it means

to live and work “in Jesus' name.” It's entitled "To the Church Organist," and in it he reflects on the way we often pray the name of Jesus in our liturgy without allowing the power of that name to enter our experience.

*“Through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

*You wait for that,*

*And when those words are said*

*Your hands, obedient, fall upon the keys and strike,*

*For us to sing thereby, “Amen.”*

*“Through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

*Would God, our hands not only, but our hearts and head*

*Obedient answered when those words were said.*

*And every inmost thought, each hope, each word*

*Echoed “Through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

*That when those words were uttered, then,*

*We answered with our life, “Amen!”*

When we begin to take that truth seriously, it will transform, now only our own lives, but the life of the community in which we live and the life of the larger world beyond.