

Holy Name – SJ – What's in a Name?

Galatians 4:4-7 1/1/12

St. John's Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

What's in a name? For most of us it's obviously of rather great importance. Our names are who we are! Some folks are not particularly happy with the one they were given by their parents; so they use another throughout their lives. Some people have names that are a special challenge, because others are often spelling or pronouncing them incorrectly. On more than one occasion when I was a prosecutor I discovered that defendants who were brought to my attention were actually themselves victims of identity theft: someone else had used their name and consequently these unfortunate people were wrongly arrested for the crime the other had actually committed.

Well, today we commemorate the day that Jesus was given his name in the ceremony required by his religion. It's significant for us as well as for him because the name he was given, Jesus, the name that the angel Gabriel told Mary to name him, meant, in its Hebrew form, savior – a truly Holy Name. But what is even more significant for us is that – in a way that is at the heart of the Christian mystery – ultimately, because he brings salvation to us, we share in the meaning of that name and thus in his relationship with his true father, whom we also may now call “Abba! Father!” This morning's passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians is an expression of that mystery – and why it matters so much to us.

Let's start our effort to unpack and understand what Paul is saying by recalling that in Jesus' day – and even today in some cultures – the name that Jesus was given in the naming ceremony in the temple would have been no more than, in English, “Jesus son of Joseph.” Frankly, it's no different from the present-day custom in Iceland, where a boy who is the son of a man named Peter may well himself be named Jon Petersson, and his sister: Anna Petersdottir. **Your** name in these cultures is your first, given name. Indeed, in Iceland, should you want to find someone in the phone book, you look him or her up by that first name, not, as it is done here, by the last name, since that's how the book is arranged. But beyond the fact that “Jesus” is so appropriate a name to be given to the one who was to be the savior of the world, and the fact that our own given names are frequently the product of an intense search and deliberation by parents who want our names also to be especially meaningful, people around us want almost always to know not only who **we** are but who our families are as well. Not only, surely, was it meaningful to his neighbors to know that Jesus was the son, presumably, of the carpenter Joseph and his wife Mary, but was it not also important in the course of his ministry that he could be identified as coming from the lineage of the greatest of Israel's kings – King David?

As important as his name may have been to Jesus' neighbors, to those who came to be his disciples, and to the crowds who followed him throughout his ministry, Paul's message in today's reading, though it is read in the context of Jesus' naming ceremony, is not, finally, about Jesus' name and **his** true parentage. It is, rather, about who **we** are because of who Jesus was. Jesus was, like us, born to a woman, and under the law – indeed, under more than one set of laws: the laws of the Jewish people, the laws of Rome, and perhaps most especially, the natural laws of our world – the laws under which every human being must live, from the time we are born until, because of those laws, we inevitably die.

Jesus is, of course, said by our religion to be the only-begotten son of the most high. Though he was born under the law, he transcends it because of that other lineage. We, on the other hand, because we don't share that lineage as naturally begotten children of God are, metaphorically at least, in a sense, in the word Paul uses, slaves – slaves to the laws of both man and nature. But now that Christ has come, and "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts," we are, Paul tells us, "no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."

Again, this rather cryptic observation about inheritance needs some explanation. In the world of that day, particularly among the Romans, it was extremely important for families to have male heirs – perhaps that ought to be further qualified to say "appropriate" male heirs, those who could carry on the proud traditions of their patrician families. And since at least many slaves in that society were what they were because they were on the losing end of war, not because they were considered to be some sort of subhuman category as was true with the slaves in our own nation's history, they might be entrusted with very important responsibilities within their master's household. Surely, for example, that must be the background for the so well known parable about the master giving his slaves a number of talents to care for. So, if a wealthy Roman didn't have heirs, he might essentially buy one from another, less wealthy Roman family, or he might, if he had one, set free and then adopt one of his particularly favored slaves. And that adopted son would acquire, as in our society, all of the rights of a natural child; so even if a natural son were later to be born it would be the adopted son who would inherit.

For Paul, then, himself a Roman citizen we may recall – a fact of his life story that got him out of a few scrapes during his missionary work – that we become, through Christ, adopted children of God the Father is of no small significance. This understanding forms the basis for his most important contribution to Christian theology – a contribution that is, frankly, all too often overshadowed by sometimes vituperative discussions about really much more minor issues arising from the fact that he lived in a particular society in a particular century with particular beliefs and customs stemming from that society's particular history – issues like the status of women and the appropriate expression of a person's sexuality.

Paul's insistence that, through Christ, we are **all** incorporated into God's family, no matter who we may be by birth, is at the very heart and soul of our religion. It was,

after all, just a few lines earlier that Paul uttered those wonderful words of assurance: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” There is no qualification there – that we are, for example, only one in Christ Jesus so long as we conform to certain societal norms of dress or behavior. It applies to us even if we are not even blood descendants of Abraham, that is, members of the Jewish people, for, Paul assures us, “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” Traditional societal boundaries are abolished. What is now important is not that we can identify as Irish, or Chinese, or Jewish or any other artificial geographic or religious or cultural distinction so beloved by humans, but that we are now in a family that is transcendent, not earth-bound – eternal, not ephemeral. In the words of one very popular modern hymn – with apologies for its failure to be gender-inclusive – “with God as our Father, brothers all are we.” So if this is now our true family, should we not, recognizing our human weaknesses and foibles, nevertheless strive always to live up to the standards of our new Father and brother? With God’s help we will. AMEN