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The National Presbyterian Church

Four Disciples: What's In a Name?

John 1:29-51

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In our sermons through the coming year we are looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it recorded for us in the gospel according to St. John – one of the four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry that we have in the pages of the Bible. This fall our focus is on the people that Jesus meets, whose lives intersect with Jesus – and there are many of them in John's account. Indeed, at the end of John's gospel, John gives us a wonderful insight into his selection of stories. In the 20th Chapter and in Verses 30 and 31 he says that there are so many stories of Jesus out there that he could not tell them all to us. Sometimes we are surprised when we hear of apocryphal gospels being unearthed and somebody says well these have been hidden from us by someone and they turn it into a mystery. Well John says, going back 2000 years,

Of course there are other stories than the stories included in scripture. There were so many I couldn't tell all of them to you but I have chosen these ones, these specific ones you so that through these stories you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And that in believing you may find life in His name."

"So these are my chosen ones," implies John. "I have chosen them specifically because they contain stories about people who also found life in Jesus' name." We meet some of them in our passage of scripture in John's gospel (1:29-51) today, Indeed, four who became followers of our Lord Jesus Christ: Andrew and Simon and Phillip and Nathanael found their lives meeting Jesus' life, intersecting with Jesus' life, and their lives being changed and transformed by that.

If you read the story repeatedly, not just once, but repeatedly, one of the things that emerges from the story that I'd like to draw our attention to today is the river, even a torrent of names that flow from their lips. These four disciples mentioned in our passage, provide in verses 35 through 51 of John Chapter 1, at least eight names or titles that they give to Jesus. In John Chapter 1 altogether there are four more, so a dozen names given to Jesus.

And this is no accident. Every one of them is what John calls a 'sign,' that is a

word, a name, filled with significance, and John has written these things (he says in 20:31) so that we may believe that Jesus (that's one of his names) is the Christ (that's another), the Son of God (that's another), and that believing we might have life in . . . what? . . . his name.

So let's today think a little bit about the significance of Jesus' name, and of any name or every name – your name and my name – what is in a name? At times it may seem trivial at times it's really important and Shakespeare was, I think, the one above everybody else who drew this to our attention in his play about Romeo and Juliet. Remember? They are in love. But they come from different families. They bear different family names. And those names keep them apart, keep them from having their love toward one another fulfilled. So Juliet cries out: "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name or if thou wilt not be but sworn my love and I'll no longer be a Capulet." [Romeo is listening in the shadows. He wants to speak but he keeps quiet. And Juliet goes on. She thinks she is speaking just to herself]

'Tis but thy name she says that is my enemy.

Thou art thyself though not a Montague. What's a Montague?

It is nor hand nor foot nor arm nor face nor any other part belonging to a man. O be some other name. What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. So Romeo would were he not Romeo called retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title? Romeo doff thy name and for thy name which is no part of thee take all myself.

[And Romeo now speaks up and takes Juliet by surprise.]

"I take thee at thy word. Call me but love and I'll be new baptized [that is, I'll take on whatever name you want]. Henceforth I will never be Romeo."

And Juliet says, "What man art thou that thus be screened in light so stumbles in my council? [i.e., Who are you?]

And he replies, "By a name I know not how to tell thee who I am. My name dear saint is hateful to myself because it is an enemy to thee. Had I it written I would tear the word.

And she replies "My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words of thy tongue's uttering yet I know the sound. [And she can't help it as she refers to him. She has to use his name.] Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?"

And he says, "Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike."

What's in a name? They are funny things. At times they seem trivial but at other times they are filled with power for good or evil. Sometimes, as with Romeo and Juliet, we feel trapped by a name. Capulet, Montague, Smith, Jones, whatever it

is 'I want to get out of town. My name is associated with this family here. Take me somewhere else where that name is of no importance so that I can be what? I can just be my, myself.' And so we want to escape.

And then at other times we say No, No, No. My name is important. That is my heritage. This is who I am. I will never give up my name for anything, it is that important to me. Soledad O'Brian, the CNN correspondent, tells a wonderful story of applying for a job early in her career. It may have been her first job application. It was in Connecticut. And she arrives with a person who might well be her boss and the interview begins and he looks at her resume and he reads like this, he says "Sole Daad?" Now that's an interesting name. Would you be willing to change it? Well you all know the answer of course. The answer is no. And she lost the job because of that. She wins in the end but she lost round one. She said "no, that's part of my identity. I have a human heritage and the background and this is part of the name of the Virgin Mary, Mary of Solitude. And I am not going to change it. It is that important to me." And she has lived with it successfully. And it's a part of who she is and she embraced it and stayed true to it.

There are some names we want to get rid of. There are some names we will cling to no matter what. Sometimes, though, even though we cling to our name, somebody gives us another name. We call it a nickname. And it sticks more firmly than the name we've been given (so we as parents spend hours thinking of names for our children and somebody comes along and gives them this other name and they go by that name from there on. Sometimes we think it's okay sometimes we don't!!) But some of those nicknames are really important in our culture.

So, Earvin Johnson is "Magic" . . . and he really was magic when he played. And Thomas Jonathan Jackson is better known as Stonewall, Stonewall Jackson. It was descriptive of his life.

Some nicknames lift us up and we rise up and we 'live into' those names. Some of them, though, drag us down. We may not like to call them nicknames though in a sense they are: names given to us sometimes only once. But we never forget them. They sink into the depth of our being. Like . . . *Loser . . . Loser . . . Failure . . . No good . . . Trash*. And they sting. And we can't get rid of them from our minds. And sometimes they have the power to cripple us because that's who we come to believe we are – and there's a deadly power in that.

Norman Vincent Peale tells the story of going to Hong Kong on one occasion and passing by a tattoo shop. And there in the window are all the different kinds of tattoos that you can place on your body. And he looks at this array of tattoos and he sees one which says 'Born to Lose.' Born to Lose. And he goes into the store and he's stunned by this and he says to the owner does anybody get this?

Do they put this on their body? And the store owner says yes it's a best seller out there. Norman Vincent Peale said how? How could anybody do that to themselves? And the owner says: "Before tattoo on body, tattoo in mind." Wow. And now in mind and body this is who we are? Born to lose?

How terrible that such a name should be given to us, or that we should embrace it or think that that would be true. Sometimes our names are terrible. Sometimes our names are scary. Especially when it's a double name and the double name is not used often – so, for example, my middle name is Alistair, and if a parent calls out "David," that's one thing . . . but if they were to call out "David Alistaiaiairrrrr, come here," well, you know you're in trouble! Because of the way that that middle name is used.

Sometimes hearing our name can be scary, but sometimes hearing it is like a breath of fresh air . . . We are lonely. We're blue. We think that we're lost and that there is nobody around who knows us. And then out of the blue somebody says our name: Jim? Jane? Is that you? And the sound of the voice and the name are familiar, and we say yes, who is that? And we feel embraced and warm because somebody knew our name and got it right and used it to talk to us.

The reverse side of that, though, is that awful moment when we stand before somebody we know well, and we know their name and they're familiar to us. And our mind goes blank at that moment. Somebody comes up to us and we know we need to introduce them to others but we, well we just can't do it, because the name is not there. It's close but it's not there, and we feel awful as if we're doing something terrible to somebody and in a sense we are. But we can't do anything about it. And we can't get their name because we somehow think that the name and the person are wrapped up in each other.

Well that, of course, is exactly what Shakespeare was wrestling with – the importance of names and the ambiguity of names; the power of names to define us . . . but not quite. Almost but not quite. They're tied in with who we are, but they're not. They can sum us up but they don't. And John is wrestling with this very same matter in his gospel: the importance, the impact, the power and the limitations of a name, especially as names are given to our Lord Jesus Christ.

In John's account of Jesus, in the opening chapter, as I mentioned a few moments ago, there is this torrent of names that comes pouring out, as if John wants to say right from the beginning of his story that there is no one name that can encapsulate Jesus. He is not a single- dimension person. He is multi-dimensional, and until you get that you will not sense the fullness of the power of His presence when He lived here on Earth -- and this is what I want you to understand. A dozen names in the opening chapter and he shares them one after the other.

- He calls Jesus the Word,
- he calls Jesus the Light of All People,
- the true Light.
- He calls Jesus the Only Begotten of God.
- He calls Jesus the Lamb of God.
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And then when we come to our passage with Andrew and Simon and Phillip and Nathanael the list continues.

- Through them John calls Jesus the One Who Baptizes with the Spirit,
- calls Him Rabbi,
- Messiah,
- Christ,
- King of Israel,
- Son of God,
- Son of Joseph,
- the One Spoken of by Moses.

One after another the names come out and every one of them is *significant*, that is, a *sign* that points to some dimension of this amazing person who lived here on Earth.

- He is the Word of God. In a world filled with voices coming at us all the time is His the Voice, the Word that we listen to?
- He is the true Light of all people in a world in which we don't quite know what direction we're to go in is he the Light that we follow?
- He is called the Lamb of God, that is, the One who takes away every barrier that breaks our relationship with God.
- He is called the Baptizer with the Spirit who doesn't wash us just on the outside but washes us on the inside so we can truly be pure in a way that we could never be by ourselves.
- He calls him Rabbi which means teacher.
- He calls him Messiah which means the anointed servant of God who does the will of God more perfectly than anybody else.
- Calls him the King of Israel the one who has authority over those who call themselves God's people.
- He calls him the Son of Joseph, an indication of his humanity.
- He calls him the Son of God, an indication of his royal divine kingship. He is the one before whom we bow in worship.
- He calls him the Son of Man, the one who holds all of time and eternity in His hands for you and me.

Through all these names it's as if John is saying to his readers (and we are among them now), saying to you and me, "you've got to think about Jesus in terms of the multiplicity of his names. Listen to those words. Explore those words. By knowing those words you will know about Jesus and that is critical."

But, but what we also hear in this Chapter is a second part – **that knowing about Jesus, critical as it is, essential as it is, is not the same as knowing Jesus.**

- You can know about something but not know the thing you know about.
- You can know all about making a violin but you may not be able to make it.

There is a distinction between the theoretical knowledge and the relationship there.

And what John tells us through these four disciples who meet Jesus is that we must spend our time on both of these aspects – knowing who Jesus is through his names, through which John says will find life ('in his name') – but knowing him directly as well. Not one without the other but both.

And these four disciples these four followers: Andrew and Simon and Phillip and Nathaniel discover this by making the next step between 'knowledge of His name' and 'relationship,' by coming to Jesus and speaking to Him directly, connecting their lives directly to Him and in that connection they find their lives changed.

So let's think about these four folks and what happens in this story. You can go back to the scripture now or you can go back to it later, but the story is that they are there when Jesus comes on the scene for his baptism.

ANDREW. And Andrew is one of the first on the scene. He is originally a follower of John the Baptist, and when Jesus comes to John the Baptist, Andrew is watching that interaction. And from John the Baptist Andrew learns about Jesus, that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He knows that's his name. He knows he is a "Rabbi," a teacher. He believes that he is the "Messiah," some kind of a king. **He gets these names straight. But . . . his life isn't changed until he does something simple.** He comes up to Jesus and he says where are you staying? How strange is that? That this mundane question is in the gospel! "Where are you staying?" Why should you ask? Because I want to spend some time with you. I want, in the common vernacular, to hang out with you. I want to chat with you. And this one who is the Son of God, the Word made flesh says **"Yes! Come and see and spend time with me."** And in that coming and seeing, the relationship, the life is changed forever. He knows "about," and then he knows "directly" as well.

SIMON. Or think about Andrew's brother Simon. Andrew spends time with Jesus, his life is changed, he is filled with life. He goes to Simon his brother and says come and see this one whom we've met who is the Messiah. And Simon is inquisitive and so he comes to check Jesus out – only to find out that Jesus has already checked **him** out. And that's a scary moment, isn't it, when you meet somebody and you think they don't know you and then they have all this

information about you, and you're not quite sure what that information is about. And Jesus knows all about Simon! And then, before Simon can open his mouth Jesus says to him, "I'm going to give you another name!" That's strange. "I'm going to give you another name. I am going to call you Simon; I am going to call you *Cephas*" [which is Aramaic for "Peter", which is Greek for "rock."]. That's what I will call you. I will call you rock! And what is fascinating is that this nickname doesn't fit at all. Peter is "rocky"! and "shaky"! But he is no rock! But Jesus calls him "rock" because it's as if Jesus could see into the future, into what Peter is going to become – given this name that lifts him up and turns him into what will be the leader of the early Church. And his life is changed by coming and checking Jesus out and listening and embracing what Jesus says to him directly.

PHILLIP. And the same thing is true with Phillip who comes to Jesus to begin with because he sees in Jesus a remarkable human being: he calls him 'The Son of Joseph.' This name speaks about Jesus' humanity. And he also calls him "the one who is a prophet that Moses has spoken about." That is, a leader-teacher: as if to say, "I think I can gain some good wisdom from this Jesus. He is a remarkable human being."

But within a very short period of time Jesus doesn't just act as a teacher for Phillip, and Phillip doesn't just leave saying "Wow, I feel enriched by that teaching." Jesus says, "Follow me!" It's a command with authority. And Phillip finds himself giving in to the authority, the full leadership of Jesus, so that in that conversation there's a change in who is calling the shots. It was Phillip controlling the situation to begin with, but now it's Jesus, and Phillip is under Jesus' control. All because he decided to check Jesus out and speak to him directly.

NATHANAEL. And then there's Nathanael who also comes to check Jesus out. One-by-one they come. They enter into this individual relationship with Jesus. They know His names. But they begin to talk with Him and he too finds that Jesus has already checked him out. The conversation goes like this at Verse 47:

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael asked him "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Phillip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi [name number one], you are the Son of God [name number two], you are the King of Israel [name number three]."

But, do you hear the emotion in those words? The emotion that packs those words means they're *not just names*. There's something of an intimacy there. As if Nathanael is saying "you really ARE my teacher from now on. You ARE the one whom I will worship, the Son of God from now on. You ARE the King of Israel. I give YOU authority over my life."

Names filled with passion. A new reality. Not just definitions but something that changes someone's life: *Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Joseph, Prophet like Moses, Messiah, Lamb of God, Light of all People, the Word of God.*

- By all means John is saying to us in choosing to begin his gospel this way, by all means know Jesus' names. Explore them all. There are more, even, than these. Go to Google when you leave here! Put in "Jesus' names" and you'll find many names there. Ponder them. Think about who he is. It is important to know *about* Him so that the Jesus we believe in is not one-dimensional: never encapsulated merely by one word but by many. Larger than life.

Know his names! BUT don't stop there says John.

- Andrew didn't stop there. Peter didn't stop there. Phillip didn't stop there. Nathanael didn't stop there.
- Andrew lingered with him, remained with him. Chit-chatted with him.
- Peter allowed Jesus to change his name. What names do we think of for ourselves? Could Jesus change our names and lift us up as he lifted up Peter?
- Phillip gave up control of his life to this Jesus who was not just King in name but King in deed. Jesus says follow me 80 times in the gospels. And people following him are giving up their authority to control their lives to this one that changed his life forever.
- And Nathaniel! Nathaniel came close enough to realize that Jesus, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit could see straight through him and still loved him. Wanted to clean up whatever was there and would always want to do that for him. What powerful knowledge comes from that intimate interaction?

By all means *know His names*. Unlike Capulet and Montague those names fit. And they are empowering. But don't stop there. Know Him, too, directly. This amazing one, amazingly has time for us, and wants us to come and see for ourselves.

Let us pray. Lord most High, how amazing that You should descend to us, come down to our level, allow us to call You by names, to understand You to the extent that we can sufficiently to know about You and to know You. Help us to do both and to find that in knowing Your names, in knowing Your name we find life more abundant than we could have ever imagined. So bless us to this end through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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