

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, July 31, 2011.

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

Names are important. Until the current 1979 edition, the Book of Common Prayer in the baptismal liturgy has the celebrant saying to the parents and godparents just before the actual baptism, "Name this child." And they do. On January 1 the Church observes the feast of the Holy Name, that is the Holy Name of Jesus. It used to be the feast of the Circumcision of Christ, the traditional day of naming Jewish male children. Regardless, football still dominates the day. And that's in spite of the Yankee Clipper. Forget Joe DiMaggio. Years ago, at the first and only bris, or ritual circumcision, I ever attended, the rabbinical officiant, known as the moel, was brought in from up north for the occasion, and was accordingly known as the Yankee Clipper. I passed out in the heat, along with two little girls.

Kunta Kinte, the historic figure taken into slavery in West Africa and landed at the city dock in Annapolis on the British slave ship Lord Ligonier on September 29, 1767, knew how important a man's name is. His new owner beat him almost to death to bend and break him into acknowledging his slave name, Toby. Roots is worth reading again.

Two of our Presidents, Gerry Ford and Bill Clinton, took the last names of the stepfathers who helped raise them as children. And then

there is the whole issue of wives taking their husband's last name, a vestige of when women were considered property.

Naming rights are very big these days. Make your check large enough and you would be amazed what can be named for you. Duke University is probably not alone in providing for prospective donors a handy table of what it costs for this or that. There was a controversy over the local pool hall sponsoring a Little League team in Morganton when I was a boy. I was on the Rotary Club team, but would have been proud to wear a uniform advertising Jack's Pool Room. And Jack was an Episcopalian. I have often wondered how much formal recognition Hooters could get for the right size gift to Duke. Maybe not the Chapel, but perhaps the Hooters Art Museum rather than the Nasher.

Now, we were talking names. A name was power in ancient Old Testament times. If I told you my name, I thereby yielded up some of my power. This was not lightly done, nor were name tags worn by Jacob or either of his wives. This was of course a Bible-believing family values crowd, it just happened to be a polygamous family. There is a craft beer made today in Utah which advertises "Take some home for the wives." Remember the story in Exodus when Moses was commissioned to go see the great Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go? Moses was less than enthusiastic about the assignment and did his best to talk God out of it,

even suggesting that his brother Aaron would be a much better choice. Of course had God wanted Aaron, presumably God would have called Aaron, so Moses lost the argument. But he did ask, "Suppose I am asked who sent me? What's your name? What do I tell them?" God had the answer:

I am who I am,
Tell them I am has sent you,
the Lord, the God of our fathers,
the God of Abraham, the God of
Isaac, the God of Jacob...this
is my name for ever...

That clear enough Moses? Moses reckoned it was.

Naming is central to the lesson we heard today from Genesis, but there is more to it than the historic renaming of Jacob as Israel. You may remember Jacob from the Old Testament reading last Sunday, about how he learned only when he woke up the morning after that he was married to Leah, not Rachel. There has to be a lesson in there somewhere, but it is interesting that we revere Jacob as one of our spiritual Hebrew ancestors. Many in my generation, probably moreso than is the case now, were taught that one simply does not argue with or question a parent. And to question God, or God's word, even as filtered

through the most human of hearts and minds, well that was really beyond the pale. It simply was not done, period, end of discussion. Well Jacob was either out or not paying attention the day they covered that in parent/child class, because he fought back and got into a wrestling match with God. He held his own too, for the fight went on all night to the point that God struck Jacob on his hip socket and put his hip out of joint. Still Jacob held his ground. Jacob was tough, but I suspect God may have been holding back just a little. Anyway, Jacob demanded to be blessed, so God asked him "What's your name?" Jacob. Well, you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with man, and have prevailed, a play on the Hebrew Israel. Jacob then asked "Please tell me your name." But God asked why he wanted to know and gave him the divine blessing then and there. From then on, again a play on the Hebrew, Jacob called that special place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

This name change, from Jacob to Israel, meant a life change, for him and for us, as his spiritual decedents. Remember that this history is our own history. The story, of the cunning Jacob becoming the divinely commissioned Israel, is a constant reminder to the people Israel of their own struggle with God, as well as of their mission and ours, as God's people in the plan of salvation history.

Struggling with God, battling God, arguing with God, is OK and I think to be encouraged. Moses and Jacob struggled with God, Jonah heard God's mandate and ran the other way. Quarrel with God if we want, just don't ignore the divine. Even Jesus, as he was dying, cried out with the words of Psalm 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" My mother says that at about age 2, in a crowded elevator at the Williamsburg Inn, taken over for Navy housing during the war, I looked up angelically and said "Why are you so mean to me when I'm so good to you?" We learn early to question authority, to say nothing of using guilt to manipulate our parents.

Some of us here are fortunate, as I am, to have been at the very place on the Sea of Galilee where tradition tells us Jesus fed the 5000, the miracle of the loaves and fishes. This was a crisis point in Jesus' ministry. His cousin John the Baptist had just been killed on Herod's orders. Not only did Jesus likely sense his day was coming, he had to have felt deeply the loss of his partner in ministry, so to speak. John's death is the news referred to in the Gospel that caused Jesus to move away to what he apparently thought was a place of some solitude. The crowds of course followed him. They always did. Can you imagine how charismatic and magnetic he must have been? It is little wonder he scared the power structure so much, in much the same way as the

Chinese government today is so fearful of not only the risen Christ of the non-governmental church, but also the Dalai Lama. We are given no details as to triage, but Matthew does tell us that Jesus had compassion on the crowd and cured their sick. Priority is always given to healing, and of course the power structure even found something to criticize in that, when Jesus healed folks on the Sabbath. We do not know if it was derided as Jesuscare or not. So many times in Scripture we are reminded of this priority of healing. If we aren't in the healing business, I don't know why we are here. It must have been ten or twelve years ago that we began offering the liturgical rite of healing or laying on of hands at each Sunday service here. We really had no idea if it would sell or not, but it sure has. There was however the time I was asked, I am not making this up, to pray for the Boston Red Sox. You know who you are, though I have forgotten. Thank goodness we have gotten away from the idea, certainly prevalent when I was growing up, that this practice was reserved for what we called the last rites, anointing with oil with appropriate prayers when death is imminent. And it is appropriate in that setting. I have already told Anne she will be on call when my time comes. Some years ago a woman asked me if I would be with her and anoint her when she died. I assured her I would indeed, but only if somebody called me, as they did, in the middle of the night. Families

need to remember that, as we aren't clairvoyant. Remember too the priority of healing, healing of body, of mind, of spirit, healing of broken relationships, healing among nations, and healing here in this lovely place.

Healing is easier though if hunger is alleviated. We have all seen the godawful pictures of families in Somalia now. While Jesus and his followers were not confronted with that level of hunger on the Galilean shore, the crowd had gotten hungry by the end of the day. Jesus came up with the obvious but nonetheless difficult solution, "You will give them something to eat." That's fine, but all we have are five loaves of bread and two small fish, maybe tilapia, which abound in the Galilee and are known as Saint Peter's fish. I remember encountering tilapia for the first time over 40 years ago, marketed as St. Peter's fish and flown in from Israel.

But how are you going to feed an enormous crowd on a small amount of bread and fish? You can't really, which is why Jesus' followers made the perfectly appropriate suggestion in the late afternoon that he send the crowds away so they could get home before the stores closed. Back then, as in parts of the world today, if you didn't grow it, kill it, or catch it yourself you had to shop daily. No one had a refrigerator. Jesus of course knew this perfectly well. He could and likely

did look out at the crowd, which Matthew tells us were 5000, not counting women and children. Jesus could look at the five loaves of bread and the two fish and do the math. As we know now, and in a different way the disciples knew then, Jesus was different. Remember that when he calmed the storm at sea, even the disciples asked “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?” Those who knew him best, including at times his mother, didn’t really understand him or know quite what to make of him. That sense of wonderment is little changed today, 2000 years later. Even those of us in the business, so to speak, don’t pretend to understand Jesus fully, nor know just what to make of him. Fully human yet at the same time fully divine. The son of Mary and also the son of God. Say what? Thanks heavens for faith, not to mention the Holy Spirit. That’s why the early Church Fathers in writing the Nicene Creed in 325 began it “We believe” rather than “I believe.” I don’t know how we got away from the original wording, but I am glad we returned to it in the 1979 Prayer Book. It just makes so much more sense, as this is hard stuff and we all have bad days. Isn’t it nice that I can lean on and borrow a little of your faith when the going gets tough and then reciprocate for you? I believe that’s a part of Christian community.

Back to the Galilee now where the modern Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and the Fishes, built by Gorman

Benedictines in 1982 on the foundation of a fourth century church, where the original 1700 year old mosaic of loaves and fish is still there in front of the altar. Jesus did something strange but familiar. He took the loaves and fish, looked up to heaven and blessed them, broke the bread, and gave the bread and fish to the disciples, the Eucharistic ministers or assisting clergy, who then distributed it to the multitudes. Everyone partook of the blessed food and were filled. And there was enough left over to fill 12 baskets.

We're going to do that again, right here in this holy space, just as it was done by Christ in the Gospel, though without the fish. We will still have lunch later on, and we may still have assorted ailments, aches and pains, but we will be filled spiritually and, in a foretaste of that heavenly banquet of which we have a sure and certain hope, grounded in faith, we will be fed and filled, given the energy to get up and go do what has to be done to bring about a heaven on earth for the lambs Jesus told us to feed. And, we will be healed, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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31 July 2011