

PROPER SEVEN, PENTECOST TWO, YEAR C, JUNE 22, 2025

Shakespeare once wrote “what’s in a name.” That phrase comes out of the mouth of Juliet as she tries to come to grips with the knowledge that the boy, Romeo, she is interested in is strictly forbidden to her because of a long standing feud between their families. She continues to say; That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” In other words she comes to the conclusion that the name for something or someone doesn’t matter – it is one’s essence that makes a difference.

The man we are introduced to in the gospel this morning is nameless at first. We are introduced to this man not by a name but how he lives. He is homeless, a man that is tormented and runs around naked. The neighbors try to contain him with chains but he even breaks through those and lives in the cemetery. He spends his life ranting and raving until his path crosses Jesus.

When Jesus stepped out of the boat the man confronts Jesus and starts shouting at him, perhaps to intimidate him and push him away. But Jesus responds by asking what his name is. He responds with the name of “Legion”. Obviously that is not his name but how his tortured body, mind, and spirit, is embodied in the gamut of human suffering. It’s also a play on a Roman “legion” which consisted of 5,000 soldiers that kept the Jewish people in literal and metaphorical chains.

Then Jesus talks with the man and he probably experienced the first civil conversation he’s had with anyone for a very long time. Jesus looked passed all that this man embodied and saw a human being in need of some compassion and love. He saw the essence of who he was. When we engage people directly and look them in the eye we begin to discover who they really are. And there is something to be said that when we learn someone’s name and call them by name a whole different dynamic takes place.

When I was in Seminary, many years ago, and doing my required Clinical Pastoral Education, I was at the Baltimore State Psychiatric Hospital. I was mostly on the male general ward but also on the criminally insane ward which is a whole other story. One Monday morning the staff informed me that a new patient had been brought in over the weekend. He had been in such a state that it took seven police officers to bring him in as he was about 7 ft tall and 350 pounds. As I entered the common room I saw him sprawled in a chair eyeing everyone and everything that was going on around him. Most of the patients gave him a wide berth as they were intimidated by him. There were just a few who attempted to get into his good favors. Several patients approached me to give me the low down on this new person when I felt his eyes on me and he yelled across the room, “Hey Church Lady – Come here I want to talk!” So yes, I went and sat down, introduced myself and asked him his name even though I was told what his name was. He had a lot of questions about God and trying to understand how God could possibly care for him. I would always look him in the eye, call him by his name and tell him God truly did care about who he really is – his whole entire being or essence. And even though I would always tell him my name to him I was simply “Church Lady!”

What is also interesting in the Gospel story is that after Jesus relieves this man of all the things tormenting him word travels fast to the people of the town who come out to see for themselves. What they witness scares them. When we think we know

someone, it can be difficult to make room for a new identity. The people of the town didn't really know this man, but they were familiar with the torment that raged within him. When that was taken away, a new identity shone forth. And because it was different, the townspeople were afraid. They didn't know what to make of him or how to deal with him. Here he was sitting at Jesus' feet having an intelligent conversation. So what do they do. They ask Jesus to leave and the man asks Jesus if he can go with him. But Jesus sends him away, telling him to return home and to tell everyone how much God has done for him. The encounter that Jesus has with this man gave him an identity he always had. We may not know his name, but he is known and loved by God. He is a child of God.

What happened in that village is no different than what has happened and keeps happening all over the world. Across human history communities large and small struggle to define who belongs and the criteria of who fits in.

Nearly two thousand years ago this was the very issue facing the new Christian community founded by the apostle Paul in Galatia. Questions surrounding identity and belonging were a natural part of the early Jesus movement's evolution as it spread beyond its original Jewish context to embrace people from diverse cultural, class, and religious backgrounds.

Paul proclaimed a universal and inclusive view of Christian existence, surpassing such external distinctions of gender, ethnicity, or religious heritage: "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" In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he refers to us as children of God. He calls us into our identity beyond our names, beyond the categories we turn to as ways of definition, claiming our belonging to God as the most important thing about us. In God, we are not divided from one another but drawn closer.

But notice how we sometimes still use the same categories the New Testament uses to talk about powers of separation based on sex, race, and social class. Paul is saying that these distinctions and others, these powers of the social, economic, ecclesiastical, and political structures have no place in God's kingdom. It is our vocation to oppose them, and by God's grace they should not, and ultimately they cannot, separate, isolate, define, or destroy us.

This morning we baptize Jack Robert. At his birth he was given his name that he is known by. Today we acknowledge another name that was given to him also at his birth and that is child of God. His baptism affirms this name and as he affirms his identity in Christ there are a few things I hope that not only Jack will take to heart but all of us.

1. Be Yourself - Jesus released into the bloodstream of human history the notion that being "yourself" means becoming aware of your unrepeatable, irreplaceable existence as an intimate and precious part of God's creation.
2. Love the World by Loving Your Neighbor - Jesus radically redefined one very common word: "neighbor." It is our challenge to see that we are all neighbors, that we have a neighbor connection to every other human being on earth.
3. Learn From Everyone: We are all created equal and, obviously, equal in God's eyes. Our "gifts" are not equal but we are all specially gifted by God's spirit. Recognize and celebrate the equality of our inequalities.

4. Love Always and in Every Circumstance- The more love you pour out, the more love you will have to pour forth. Love is the greatest and most perfectly renewable resource we have access to in our lives.

5. Be Merciful - "Mercy" is one of the most original and revolutionary notions ever introduced into the course of human history. The other name for "mercy" is "grace." Like Love, mercy is another immeasurable entity. There can never be an excess of mercy, and yet the smallest amount is supremely enough.

6. Learn A Living: We are called to be lifetime-learners. The work of God is ongoing, ever unfolding, and all of us are "learners". Every person you meet has something to teach you.

7. Show Courage: The courage Jesus showed was not just the courage of resistance. It was the courage of endurance. There will be some of us who may be called upon to show the courage of resistance, taking definitive, costly action, in order to stand up for justice, mercy, truth, and love. But every single one of us will find it necessary to offer the courage of endurance throughout our lives.

So, what's in a name? It is so much more than what a name can encompass. Our identities are diverse, expansive, and individual. But one identity holds precedence over all the others. One identity calls us into a community of love and into relationship with a loving God. That identity isn't one we have to earn or one we can lose. It stays with us from birth to death, no matter what paths we may have chosen: That identity is we are all children of God. Let us all affirm who we are as we baptize Jack. Amen.