January 19, 2014 – 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

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When I was a really little girl, my mother told me that when I got married I would get to change my name. I was really excited for a while there – I was going to change mine to Melissa. I don’t know when I learned the sad truth, but I pined after Melissa for quite a while. But by the time I was old enough to realize that I could change my first name if I wanted to, I was quite happy to stay Jean Elisabeth (with an S), although I did briefly change the spelling of Jean to the French version with two Ns and an E when I was at school in France, ostensibly to keep it from being confused with the masculine Jean, but really just to make it seem more special.

And then there were nicknames. We all had family nicknames, and friend nicknames, and sometimes school nicknames. My family nicknames were Jeannie and Jean Bean, and, from my brothers, some variant on Stupid. My friend nicknames were Jay, Jean-o, and Pizza, the last one having a fairly long etymology. My school nicknames were not very nice, since I was picked on a fair amount as a kid and my last name was Messer, which is a license to be mocked by every other kid in the world.

So what’s in a name? Well, obviously, names are one way of telling each other apart. If we each didn’t’ have unique names, life would be a lot more confusing than it is. As a matter of fact, when I was in grade school, almost every other girl was named Karen and it DID cause a lot of confusion. I wonder how many little Karens thought their name really was Karen S or Karen J, because that’s how the teachers told them apart?

But more than merely identifiers, our names are tied together with our identity. They are a significant part of who we are – both to ourselves and to others. It’s a very complex part of our psychological and emotional makeup. I was proud of my family names and friend names and my fancy French name because they made me feel special. And the hurtful names made me feel special in a different, and very unpleasant way, and those scars have stuck around a long time. That whole sticks and stones thing is just plain wrong, but maybe that’s a topic for a different sermon.

For today, let’s take a look at our lectionary. There’s a whole lot of naming and renaming going on in today’s readings. From Isaiah, we hear the prophet saying, “The LORD **called me before I was born**, while I was in my mother's womb **he named me.**”

Then from First Corinthians we get, “Paul, **called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus** by the will of God, and our **brother Sosthenes**, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints**, together with all those who in every place **call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**…”

And the Gospel is full of names and name calling – John calls Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit,” and “the Son of God.” The next day he repeats that Jesus is the Lamb of God to two of his own disciples, who promptly follow Jesus, calling him Rabbi. Then one of those two, Simon’s brother Andrew, found Simon and told him that they had found the Messiah, another name. And finally Jesus, upon meeting Simon, promptly renames him Cephas, or more commonly, Peter, the rock.

And up until this point in John, Jesus has already had many names – the Word, the Light, the Christ, and of course, John the Baptist is John the Baptist.

What we call people is important, and John knew that how we name Jesus was important to the identity of his first century community, just as it’s important to us today. In the time that John was writing, the Temple had already been destroyed. The Temple had been THE place where atonement for sins could be made for first century Jews. So John’s Jewish community was already reeling from that blow. Then, to add insult to injury, because they were followers of Jesus, John’s community were also not allowed to go to the synagogue’s either. They were completely cast off from the traditions of their people.

So calling Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, and thereby identifying him with the Temple atonement sacrifice would have great meaning to them. So, too, would naming Jesus, “Rabbi” have a lot of significance for them, since they were denied access to the teachers in the synagogues.

For us, perhaps those names don’t have as deep a meaning, but most of us can readily identify with the name, “Son of God.” Especially in this part of the country, with its plethora of Johnsons and Petersons and Olsons. I looked up the Scandinavian patronymic naming system on Wikipedia and found out that Norway didn’t change to the mandatory use of surnames until 1923, and Iceland still doesn’t use them. Before then, you were known as the son or daughter of your father – that was your identity.

So identifying Jesus as his Father’s Son is both easily recognizable and emotionally significant to us. And identifying him as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit as easily recognizable to us as a baptismal community. For us in some ways, baptism is our equivalent of the atonement sacrifice made in the Temple.

So what is the point of all this naming and identifying? Part of it is merely to better understand who Jesus is. But as you know, I like to round out my theoretical and hypothetical ideas with practical ones. What does knowing the many names of Jesus, and what they say about his nature, impel us to DO?

The answer lies, in this passage, with John the Baptist. In the other Gospel depictions of Jesus being baptized by John, such as the one we heard from Matthew last week, John was merely the baptizer and the announcement of the nature of who Jesus was and his naming as the Son of God was done by a voice from heaven. But in the fourth Gospel, John does the announcing. Twice.

In one of the commentaries I read, the writer talked about the bracelets that used to be popular that said WWJD – What Would Jesus Do. That commentary suggested that perhaps it might be better to say, WWJTBD – What Would John the Baptist Do. What John would do, at least in the Gospel of John, is evangelize.

“Hey, look! See! God is alive. God is in our midst. The Holy Spirit is at work in us and through and for us and even in spite of us! Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

We’ve celebrated the wondrous anticipation of Jesus’ coming to earth. We’ve celebrated his Incarnation. Now God really is among us and we are celebrating his Manifestation in our lives. That’s what Epiphany is all about, and part of that is shouting far and wide, “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God!"

This Sunday is sandwiched between the Feast of the Confession of St. Peter, which happened yesterday, and the celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday, which happens tomorrow. These are perfect examples of proclaiming and living out the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter’s confession is not of some wrongdoing, but rather that Jesus is the Messiah. It’s after this pronouncement that Peter is transformed into the leader that he was.

Dr. King was a fabulous speaker and could certainly proclaim with the best of them. Tomorrow, if you have time, try to listen to one of his speeches on the Internet – if you haven’t done so before, you will be amazed. But it was his actions – the peaceful protests and marches and his living out of the Gospel in the face of great hardship and ultimately his martyrdom – that transformed our world and brought us just a little closer to God’s kingdom.

So that’s our Epiphany action plan – tell everyone we meet about Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Or better yet, show everyone we meet by our actions and our words. As Jesus says later in John, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That’s what John the Baptist would do. Let’s go out from here and make sure the world knows Jesus’ name.

Amen