

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Getting Your Name Changed"
Dr. J. Dent

March 1, 2015
Second Sunday in Lent

Have you ever wondered why you have the name you have? Did you ever have a chance to ask your parents why they named you what they did? Mind you, this is not always a pleasant exercise. Friends of mine found out they were named because their mother liked a certain soap opera or their father liked a certain sports star. Or my mother told us that she and Dad simply liked the multisyllabic sound of the names with the monosyllabic last name. And then the irony of this is that in American style, all our multisyllabic names were reduced to one syllable anyway.

Names are a way to identify individuals in a community. Family names often reflected either the occupation of the father, e.g. Smith in times where horses and blacksmiths were abundant and Cooper, in times where working in copper and metal was greatly needed. A family name since ancient times might also place you in your community, thus Abram of Ur, Jesus of Nazareth, and possibly my grandfather Arthur of Dent, a small village in Cumbria in England in the West riding of Yorkshire. Wikipedia says "Dent was the original site of the Dent Folk Festival and is now the site of the Dent Music and Beer Festival at the end of June. The first event was held in 2009 and was hailed as a great success." So much for that history.

While family names are inherited, usually through the father, although in these days, one never knows; first names are indeed given. And many people become fascinated with the meaning of these given names. We were such parents, Lynn pregnant with our first child in 1986. So we bought *The Best Baby Name Book in the Whole World*. The author of this book was not short on confidence. And we had a great time looking through it and more importantly trying to figure out what names mean. We wanted our children's names to mean something and not just "sound good" like our parents told us the method by which they chose our names.

And we came up with Alexandra, along with her middle name means "Christian helper of humanity." And Stacy, along with her middle name means "resurrection joy."

In the reverse direction, you may know that many people change their names for many reasons. Famous people have done so over the years. You may know some of these. I'll go through these quickly:

Alan Alda was Alphonso d'Abruzzo.
Fred Astaire was Frederick Austerlitz.
Jack Benny was Benjamin Kubelsky.
Mel Brooks was Melvin Kominsky.
Tom Cruise was Thomas Mapother IV.
Tony Curtis was Bernard Schwartz.
Doris Day was Doris von Kappelhoff.
Bo Derek was Mary Collins.
Whoopi Goldberg was Caryn Johnson.
Cary Grant was Archibald Leach.
Rock Hudson was Roy Harold Scherer Jr.
Angelina Jolie was Angelina Voight.
Michael Landon was Eugene Maurice Orowitz.
Jerry Lewis was Jerome Levitch.
Jack Lord was John Joseph Patrick Ryan.
Marilyn Munroe was Norma Jean Baker.
Anthony Quinn was Antonio Rodolfo Oaxaca.
Meg Ryan was Margaret Mary Ann Hyra.
Winona Ryder was Laura Horowitz.
Charlie Sheen was Carlos Estevez.
Danny Thomas was Muzyad Yakhoob.
John Wayne was Marion Michael Morrison.
Bruce Willis was Walter Willison.
Natalie Wood was Natasha Gurdin.

Now what do you notice with this list? People are either trying to cover something up, and perhaps make a bigger splash. Certainly people have changed their names to disguise their ethnic origin or their family's religious affiliation. For example, during WWII, it wasn't good to have a German name in N. America. And someone trying to be the tough guy, like John Wayne, may have found it difficult bearing the name Marion. Or perhaps Whoopi didn't like the ordinary sound of Caryn Johnson, so she went in the opposite direction of many of the Jewish folks on the list. People change their names for all kinds of reasons.

But when God gives you a new name or changes your name, it means something big. In Genesis 17, for Abraham, it meant a sea change, a great

transformation, from being a “father of many” *Ab-ram*; to a “father of many nations” *Ab-raham*. God was expanding his legacy from a smaller one to a gigantic one. Of course, the irony in both these of Abraham was that he could not have children with his wife. He was childless until he was in his 80s with Ishmael and then Isaac at 100 years old. And here is the miracle of the good news. God gives us a legacy supernaturally, where we have nothing but the grave physically to look forward to. God gives us grace and a relationship with Himself, even when we are looking in the other direction. By trusting, by having faith in God, we are children of Abraham. So this one man who didn't have many children physically, has the legacy of being the father of the faith, that faith held in many nations. May God expand our vision to see what He is doing in our lives today.

Similarly with Sarai, “my princess” *Sara-i*; God changes the name to Sarah, “the princess.” Both are good names, as with Abraham, but there is something to having a child when there is no longer any hope of having a child. It is not a cruel joke on a senior citizen. It is the reviving of a dream, and the coming to fruition of that dream that was once lost. It is the expanding of a vision, that naturally seems like a joke, and provokes laughter, but then the miracle produces a deeper laughter, the laughter of the victory of God over our weaknesses.

Both Abraham and Sarah are given the promise of royalty coming forth from their barren state. This is ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah from Abraham's family. Jesus is God become human, bringing us the Message of life and fullness of life in relationship to God for all peoples.

And we are both warned and encouraged to take up that name in regard to ourselves that was first used in Antioch. In Acts 11:26, there the believers were first called Christians. It was no doubt a derogatory name. But the believers took it up. Paul did not reject it in his defense of the faith before King Agrippa in Acts 26:28, but said it was what he is. And Peter noted in 1 Peter 4:16: “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

So we are encouraged to bear that name Christian: “follower of Christ.” In these days in Canada and specifically here in this city, it is no longer a badge of honour, no longer what it once was. In these days, we must confidently speak of ourselves as followers of Christ, not ashamed of the Gospel, the good news of Christ, not ashamed to visibly be seen in church, publicly

worshipping, publicly praying, publicly telling others by our actions, if not by our words, that this act on Sunday mornings is the most important act of our week, of our lives. And if you are unsure today, give yourself to Christ anew; say “yes” to the Lord Jesus Christ. Let him call you by name. Let him love you anew, where others may have done everything else to you.

Hear Jesus’ words anew today: If you want to follow me, Jesus Christ, you must be a self-denier. If you want to follow me as Lord, I call you to be a certain kind of loser. Self-deniers and losers are those who are willing to serve, willing to care, willing to look into my eyes, to love the unlovable, and serve the un-serve-able.

If you want to follow Jesus, it is simple and begins with a simple choice. But after that Jesus begins to spell out other choices. Who wants to be a loser? But then he says, “If you really want to be a winner and win the whole world, but you lose your own life, your own soul, what good is that?” “Lose your life for my sake,” Jesus says, “and for the gospel,” and “you will save your life, your very soul.” What can you give in exchange for your soul? The answer is nothing, not that crazy genre of film that has people trading their soul to the devil for something.

Jesus warns us, “Don’t be ashamed of Jesus. Don’t be ashamed of your faith, or your relationship with God.” It is your lifeline. And if you are ashamed of this relationship with Jesus and with God, he too will be ashamed of you in the end. There is no shame where we know God. There is life. Yes, we have many character defects, when we are honest, we can acknowledge such. But God is for us. Let us boldly take the name Christian and help people know the Lord and all the benefits that come from knowing Him.

Let us pray.