

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Names”
Matthew 16: 13-26
12th Sunday After Pentecost
August 27, 2017

Today’s Scripture lesson begins this way, “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Before reading further, it is important to note the location where this scene is set.

As those who have been reading Brian McLaren’s book *Everything Must Change* know, the name of the city, Caesarea Philippi, is evocative. The city was built near the base of an escarpment, where an important spring emerged from a cliff face. The spring had been a center for worship of the Canaanite god Baal, but then the Greek god Pan had replaced Baal when the Seleucid regime came to power. Elaborate niches which are still visible today were carved into the cliff face, and statues of Pan and other Greek deities were placed there. The city became known as Panias after the god Pan. When the Romans came to power and after Herod the Great who was the Roman regional ruler died, his son Herod Philip was given control of the region. He renamed Panias, calling it Caesarea to honor the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, Philippi to honor himself. (1)

The location of Jesus’s asking the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” is not an incidental detail. Standing in the shadow of the cliff face with its idols of false gods set into their carved niches in a city named for narcissistic power-driven political leaders, Jesus asks a question which delineates a sharp contrast between their ways and his way, that is, God’s way.

Let’s read on...

“Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.”

Those words are a blast from the past, aren’t they? Any of us who were alive and watching TV in the 80’s and 90’s remember them as the lyrics of the theme song from the long-running sitcom *Cheers*, set in a bar in Boston.

It is true, isn’t it?

It means a lot when someone goes to the effort to know our names.

With the start of school, teachers are gearing up for the annual challenge of learning their students’ names. Indeed, in my sermon research this week on Google, I typed in “learning names.” What should pop up but a host of articles for teachers offering useful techniques for learning their students’ names?

One of those articles published in the *Journal on Best Teaching Practices* caught my eye. It struck me as quite theological, actually. The writer challenged readers to “ask yourself: who is the one teacher in your entire life who made the biggest difference for you—who taught you so well that you still think about him or her as your best teacher. I bet that for almost all of us, that best teacher was someone who knew you by name.” (2)

By these standards, Jesus was clearly Peter’s Master Teacher.

Jesus knew Peter by name from the first moment that he encountered him. Way back in Matthew 4, we read “As [Jesus] walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw... Simon (which is what his mama and daddy named him when he was born), who is called Rocky (the literal translation of *petra*, Peter)...”

It is a powerful thing, a thing that is full of grace, to be known and called by one’s name. The writer of the article in the journal for teachers continues and concludes, “...learning students’ names is fundamental to developing a sense of community in the classroom...the nonverbal message goes out that the student is a part of the community of people who can do mathematics, statistics, chemistry, or whatever the subject is.” (3)

It was a powerful thing, a thing full of grace, for Rocky to be called by his name at the Sea of Galilee and summoned by Jesus with the words, “Follow me.” And now we come to this passage much later in Matthew’s Gospel and the pool of grace into which Jesus had initially called Peter deepens into a bottomless ocean of blessing. For what Jesus does here is to say to Simon, “you have been known by your nickname of Peter, that is ‘Rocky.’ Now live into your name more fully because you are *petra* (in Greek). You are the rock on which I will build my church.” The message could not be clearer: you are a part of a community of people who can do something even greater than math and chemistry—you are a part of a community who can carry on my ministry in the world, a ministry of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God and neighbor.

What Jesus did in calling Peter by name is what the church does in the name of Christ every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism. It is no small thing that we call each person by name today as Davidson College Presbyterian Church baptizes three members of the McDermott family, “Catherine Nicole, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Connor Patrick, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Brooke Alexandra, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” It is a personal word to each of them: “you are a part of something so much bigger than yourself, a part of something so much bigger than your beautiful family, you are a part of a community which walks in the way of Jesus and possesses his power to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and neighbor.”

Now, the passage from Scripture which we have read today is honest, brutally honest, in letting us know that to be a member of the Jesus community is not to walk the easy road. Peter protested when Jesus began to show his disciples that living according to God’s principles means risking personal comfort and security and safety and even dying in pursuit of justice, mercy, and peace. He protested, I think, because if this were true for Jesus, then walking in Jesus’s way might well demand it of him. He was right! And Jesus called him out on it. He even called him the name “Satan.”

Jesus calls Peter “Satan” in the moment, but Satan wasn’t who Peter really was. And Jesus knew that for in the next breath, Jesus calls Peter back to his best self, as he calls us back to our best selves time and again. Jesus called Peter back to the “something bigger;” he turned Peter as he turns the

church time and again and set him on the road, the road that leads outward to the world, the road that leads to justice, love, and peace. “That’s what you signed on for, Rocky. Now be a rock!...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit someone if he or she gains the whole world, but forfeits their life?”

If you were present on the Town Green on Wednesday night for the interfaith vigil in response to the events in Charlottesville, perhaps you experienced, as I did, a resonance with the scene that Matthew presents in today’s Scripture lesson. Alexis Coleman from Davidson United Methodist Church and Joel Simpson from Mt. Zion United Methodist Church did the heavy lifting in planning the service. They instructed the clergy who participated in the leadership of the service to say our names and to say the names of our houses of worship. We were named, as Peter was named by Jesus. We each brought the particularities of our own faith traditions and the particularities of our own lived experiences regarding race. We hoped that by naming ourselves and our houses of worship that each person present might feel himself or herself named as well. The vigil began by acknowledging our own brokenness as individuals. But we did not linger in our individuality; we moved into communal lament with those wishing to receive ashes with the sign of Tau on the hand being able to do so. Of course, I did not know everyone who came to the station where I was dispensing ashes, and so I was not able to call him or her by name (it occurs to me now that I should have asked them), but many of those who came to my station, I did know by name, and thus was granted the gracious and humbling experience of naming them and thus acknowledging both their brokenness and the calling to move forward in hope.

At the close of the service, we lit our candles in the darkness with the expectant hope that our nation and our world may even yet become a place where every person, no matter what names or labels someone, be it person or society, slaps on them, is named and valued in the fullness of their God-given and God-blessed humanity and that we as the church may be a participant in making the world a place where everybody is known by name.

1. Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 109-110.

2. Kent Syverud, quoted by Tamara Glenz, “The Importance of Learning Student’s Names,” *Journal on Best Teaching Practices*, April 2014, 21.

3. E.W. Willemsen, quoted by T. Glenz.