

Sermon Epiphany 2 Year A, January 16, 2011

What's in a name? As Juliet says to Romeo in Shakespeare's, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Here Juliet tells Romeo that a name is an artificial and meaningless convention, and that she loves the person who is called "Montague", not the Montague name. While this quote of Shakespeare's is famous, I take issue with the rationale with which Juliet gives....that names are meaningless convention....I heartily disagree.

Names are of great importance. They carry with them power and identity. In Genesis when God created human beings he gave them the power of naming. In Genesis chapter 2 it states: *"So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name."* *The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field."*

When parents are expecting children, one of the first and most important activities they do is contemplate a name for their child. They want to give the child just the right name. There is usually a story as to why each of us were given the name we were given. I am no exception.

I grew up in a town of about 8,000 people in northern Michigan. While a relatively small town, there were three separate families of Kolanowski's in the town and each one was large. There were so many of us that my girlfriend's last name was Kolanowski...no relation. The task my parents saw before them was to find a name that was unique that

no one else had in the town. Their efforts were to be applauded but sadly they failed. In this town of 8,000 people there were three Ron Kolanowski's...one in each of the families. One of the other Ron's was born just days before me and my mom didn't know they named him Ron. Luckily, the other Ron of the same age went to different schools so we were never together. I also understand that this same other Ron is currently or has just been released from prison...again....no relation.

I bring up this topic about names because the readings before us today emphasize the importance of naming and the identity that comes with the name.

In our first reading from Isaiah, the writer says, "The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me." God's calling and naming us before our birth, grounds our fundamental identity in God as God's own. This identity as God's own comes with a responsibility and a purpose. God's naming us before our birth as the writer states, "*I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*" While this prophecy has been interpreted as referring to Jesus and is thus appropriately coupled with today's gospel, it also applies to all of us who have been created in God's image and are grounded in this God-given identity. God's claiming us as God's own comes with a duty...we are named for a reason by God...to advance that which God has given us to do.

Names are important. I did a little research on the meaning of some names and discovered that my own name of Ronald is a Scottish version

on Scandinavian Ragnvaldr from Regin Advice Counsel and valdr Ruler. But I like the name Ron better because in Hebrew it means song or joy. The name given to our Lord...the name Jesus is Yeshua which means Yahweh is Salvation or God will help. The name Yeshua is also the root of the name Joshua....which is my son's name.

In Paul's opening greeting to the church in Corinth we hear Paul reminding the faithful that they are *"called to be saints, together with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Through our identity as members of the Body of Christ God has called *you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."*

Last week we celebrated the feast of the Baptism of our Lord by John the Baptist. This week the story continues from the gospel according to John. In this passage there is much naming going on. John the Baptist reveals Jesus' true identity as he cries out *"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* John proclaims him as the *Son of God*. Two of John's disciples follow Jesus. When Jesus sees that these disciples of John were following him he asks them, *what are you looking for?* They respond by calling Jesus Rabbi which means teacher and ask him *where are you staying?* Jesus responds *come and see*. One of those disciples...Andrew... follows Jesus and says to his brother Simon *"We have found the Messiah..."* again revealing Jesus' identity as the Christ...the Greek word for Messiah which means "the anointed one." When Jesus meets Simon which means *it is heard* in Hebrew Jesus gives him a new name. He says to Simon you are to be called Cephas in

Aramaic which is translated into Greek as Πέτρος (Petros) meaning stone or rock, and English as Peter.

Baptism was not uncommon during the time of Jesus. Ritual washing and rites of purification were commonplace in Jewish religious tradition. What makes the baptism of Jesus unique is what John witnessed...the Spirit descending on Jesus and the Father's proclamation of Jesus as God's Son. God's naming of Jesus as his Beloved Son gives John the Baptist the proof and the manifestation of Jesus' true identity.

So what do we take away with us this morning from these readings?...firstly that names are important...they give us an identity that is unique to us....the names given to us by our parents provide us with a title that we are known throughout our life. Secondly, the readings point to a deeper reality...that Jesus' identity is given him by God and is made manifest to others...including us up to this very day....that Jesus Christ *Yahweh is salvation...the anointed one* is the Holy One of God. Thirdly, that God has named us before we were born...and given us our primary identity...it is not just **who we are**, but importantly **whose we are**. As those who follow in Jesus' baptism, we participate in the life of Christ. We are baptized into Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And, as Paul reminded those in the church of Corinth...*we are called to be saints, together with all those in every age who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. In short, who we most truly are...*we are God's through our fellowship in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*. Amen.