

Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 24C]

October 20, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Genesis 32: 22-31; Psalm 121:2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

A pregnant woman gets into a car accident and falls into a deep coma. Asleep for nearly six months, she wakes up and sees that she is no longer pregnant. Frantically, she asks the doctor about her baby.

The doctor replies, "Ma'am, you had twins! A boy and a girl. The babies are fine. Your brother came in and named them."

The woman thinks to herself, "Oh no, not my brother -- he's a fool!" Expecting the worst, she asks the doctor, "Well, what's the girl's name?"

"Denise," the doctor says.

The new mother thinks, "Wow, that's not such a bad name! Guess I was wrong about my brother. I like Denise!"

Then she asks the doctor, "What's the boy's name?" The doctor replies, "DeNephew."

Oh, that poor child. We all know that there is power in a name. Just think of a parent calling your name. You knew right away whether you were in trouble or not by the tone — or maybe the use of your middle name, which was rarely good news. In the mouth of someone who loves us, our name can sound like a blessing. In the mouth of someone trying to ridicule us, our name can sound like a curse or spit. Many cultures throughout the world and history believed that knowing someone's name gave you some kind of power over that person. There's some truth in that as we realize how deeply we can be affected by the names others call us on the playground, office, or street. With the birth of cyberbullying hundreds can witness the cruelty and opt to join in the torment — sometimes with tragic, fatal results. Names have power — whether it's our birth name or the other names we are called or the names we call ourselves. That power can be destructive. Or that power can also be life-giving as we see in today's Scripture story of Jacob's wrestling match,.

David Lose does a great job of summarizing the larger saga about Jacob. "The events divide into two main parts. The first revolves around his immediate family and begin in the 25th chapter of Genesis. Jacob is the second born of the twins granted to Isaac and Rebekah. He is not only the younger of the two but also the more slight of stature, and so he learns early on to live by his wits rather than his strength. His brother Esau, by contrast, is a wild and woolly hunter, and, as the eldest, is heir to his father's blessing and fortune.

The rivalry between these two siblings -- Esau favored by his father, Jacob by his mother -- is palpable throughout the narrative, but it erupts most fiercely on two distinct occasions. The first takes place when Jacob demands from his famished and perhaps foolish brother his birthright in exchange for a pot of stew. The second occurs a few years

later when Jacob, coached by his mother, deceives his old and half-blind father Isaac into thinking that he is his brother and in this way steals Esau's blessing. The first act in the drama of Jacob's life closes with his brother's distraught and enraged wails providing the backdrop to Jacob's cowardly flight to the household of his uncle Laban.

The second movement in this drama revolves around Jacob's years with his equally deceitful uncle. Time and again these two will match wits, until eventually Jacob flees once more, taking with him two of Laban's daughters, most of his flock, and much of his fortune.

Jacob is still enroute from Laban's home when he receives word that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. Sitting, as it were, between a rock and hard place, Jacob hides away half of his wealth, and then, with what is left, he sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau, intending to bribe his way back into his brother's good graces. This Sunday's reading picks up the narrative just as Jacob, fearful that all his plans and schemes will come to naught, sends the rest of his servants and family across the river, hoping, perhaps, that even if Esau refuses his tribute he may, at least, take pity on Jacob at the sight of his defenseless wives and children.

And then it happens.... Pacing by the dark and troubled river and accompanied only by his own frustrated schemes and feeble contingencies, Jacob is attacked by what can only seem like a demon. All night long the two wrestle, until, as daylight approaches and Jacob seems on the verge of prevailing, his opponent dislocates his hip and demands release. "Bless me, first," Jacob cries, perceiving that, whether demon or angel, this is no ordinary creature. To which his adversary, soon to be revealed as the Lord, responds, "Tell me your name."

"Now Jacob's name means the usurper, or, more loosely, the cheat, for he is the one who came from his mother's womb already grabbing his brother's heel. And how appropriate a name it is, for all of his life Jacob has devoted his energy and wit to usurping what rightfully belongs to others. That is, Jacob at heart is nothing more than a common trickster, charlatan, and scoundrel. And deep down, you see, Jacob knows this. And so when the Lord pins Jacob down and demands to know his name, he is demanding no less than that Jacob confess -- confess his ill-gotten gains and shoddy character, confess his misused talents and wasted life. And to do this, to come clean, is for one such as Jacob nothing less than death, for when the con man and phony is revealed for what he is, what has he left? Viewed this way, we might eagerly cheer as Jacob, at long last, is about to receive his proper comeuppance, to be put in his place once and for all and finally get what he deserves.

Except ... except that in the face of Jacob's confession of his name, the Lord -- far from doling out the punishment Jacob both certainly merits and probably expects -- the Lord gives Jacob a new name. He calls him *Israel*, the one who has wrestled with God and with man and has prevailed. And so the scene concludes with Jacob limping away from this contest not defeated, but carrying a new name and character and the chance to life as a new person. For not only will Jacob and Esau be reconciled in the chapters to come, but Jacob will also sire a nation from his twelve sons and they and their descendants proudly bear his name, Israel, even to this day." ¹

Can you see yourself, can you see us on that riverbank with Jacob? It was more likely at an ornate or simple font filled with water in a church. Whatever name you were given at birth, you received a new one at your Baptism. God beholds us, God calls us God's own beloved child. Beloved child of God — it describes who we are. It points us toward living that reflects whose we are. Growing in our understanding of all it means to be God's own beloved child, we are empowered to "let our lives so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."² There's power in the name "child of God."

Many of you might remember the ground-breaking T.V. mini-series, "Roots." It begins with the story of a young man, Kunta Kinte, born in Africa, captured by slave traders and sold to an American slave holder. They told him his name was now Toby but he knew this wasn't right. His name was Kunta Kinte. He kept trying to escape despite punishment, despite other slaves warning him in a language he did not understand. When captured after what would be his final escape, the overseer, Mr. Aims, is determined to break his will. Kunta is tied up and viciously whipped in front of all the other slaves. "Your name is Toby. I want you to say your name." The overseer demands. He says, "Kunta Kinte". The whipping continues. "When the master gives you something, you take it. Your name's Toby and you'll have it all your life. I want to hear you say your name, Toby." Still he says, "Kunta." All those watching are horrified, wondering if he can survive the violence. Some wonder why he won't just say the name and stop the whipping. Others are awed by his determination to hold on to his family given name, to the free man he was born to be.

The savage whipping continues, with the overseer yelling, demanding, "What's your name? Toby, who are you?" Kunta doesn't answer. But that's not good enough. This runaway is to be broken, like a wild horse, tamed and taught who is in charge. So the beating and berating continues. "What's your name, Toby?" Finally Kunta says, "Toby." "Say it louder. I want everyone to hear you." "Toby. My name Toby." And the overseer orders him cut down. Kunta crumbles to the ground.

An older slave named Fiddler comes to him. Before that day, Fiddler had been trying to help Kunta adjust to his new life as a slave, help him to learn how to play the role and stay out of the wrath of the master or overseer. He had tried to persuade him to stop running. He had been coaching him to say, "Toby" and to quietly accept his lot. But now, he sits by the broken Kunta, unties his hands, put his own coat under his head and gives him sips of water. Fiddler must speak softly as he consoles and comforts. Fiddler finally whispers with great power, "You know who you be. You are Kunta Kinte. It's who you will always be." ³There's power in a name.

"We are each called by so many names day in and day out. Some of them good and affirming, many more not." It can be terribly difficult even to hear, let alone believe, that God chooses to call us beloved daughter, beloved son. And yet there it is, as it says in the eighth chapter of Romans, the Holy "Spirit and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are heirs as well, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."

Like Jacob we wrestle with the questions, "Who are you? What is your name? What is it that others call you? More importantly, what is it that you call yourself? What is that name you can scarce speak for fear or shame? Scoundrel, cheat, or phony like Jacob? Unworthy, irresponsible, unfaithful? Discouraged or burnt-out? Divorced, deserted, or widowed? Coward or bully? Unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Abused or abuser? Ugly or abnormal? We feel terribly vulnerable to admit the power of these names.

But I think that only as we confess the names we wear and bear, like Jacob did on that riverbank, can we also hear God's unrelenting response: "No! No! You are to me like Christ! You are my beloved, the one I chose and redeemed at great cost, the one to whom I am committed and to whom I promise to love all the days of your life. For you are my child!"

"What if we imagine that church is a place we can come to each week and bring all our other names with us, confessing them honestly, confessing the pain they bring and then leave them behind, departing the assembly simply as *Christians*, those who bear the name of Christ and armed with the love, commitment, and courage of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Names have power. Names, as we know, can limit us, hurt us, even kill. But they can also heal and make alive. A part of what we do as we gather each week is to come and be reminded once again of our true name and new identity so that we may go out into

the world as new persons, God's own beloved child⁴, freed to go in peace and serve the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Amen.

ENDNOTE

(Much thanks to David Lose for his illuminating and articulate exposition on this text. This sermon includes some direct quotes and adaptations.)

1. David Lose, "The Power of Names" as posted on October 14, 3013 on www.workingpreacher.org

2. From the service of Holy Baptism, [ELW](#) p. 231.

3. I recalled hearing this illustration at one of the lectures at a [Lectionary Homiletics](#) conference. I was able to find a portion of the film clip on YouTube. Unfortunately it had music over the dialogue and a racist image flashed at the end of the clip. The Washington County public library has a copy of the miniseries but not locally or immediately available.

4. David Lose, "The Power of Names" as posted on October 14, 3013 on www.workingpreacher.org