

What Can God Build On Your Name?

Matthew 16:13-20

August 27, 2023

Juliet says to Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

The Journal of the American Medical Association did a study on the names of people in the medical profession in the United States. Doctors' names included: Needle, Probe, Lance, Drill, Scope, Bolt, Pin, Croak and Klutz. (Would you see a Dr. Croak or Dr. Klutz?)

On the upside, they found physicians named Fix, Cure, Heal, Brilliant, Able and Best. My orthopedic doctor is Dr. Goode. I worked at a church camp where the directors were Mr. and Mrs. Camp (their real last name).

Do names make a difference? Can a person's name determine his or her destiny?

In our scripture passage, Jesus asks the disciples: who do people say I am? The crowds have been observing Jesus for some time but no consensus had developed. Who is Jesus? Consider the data about Jesus:

He was born under unusual circumstances.

He didn't take over the family business, as expected of a Jewish male, rather he became a wandering teacher.

Rather than take on a wife, which was expected of a Jewish male, he remained single.

He had no visible means of income, yet spent a lot of time at parties and provided food for thousands.

He performed miracles, but never used his power to benefit himself.

He cast out evil spirits, but at the same time is blamed for being in league with them.

He appears to be righteous, but hangs out with the dregs of society. As we learned in our Jesus Eats! Class, he even ate with them.

He talks about eternal life, but seems obsessed with death.

What do you call a man like that? Who do people say I am?, Jesus asks his disciples.

The disciples tell him what they have heard: "Some say you are John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Jesus listens, and then turns the question on them. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

The name calling begins. Simon says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus is so pleased he responds “Blessed are you. Your name will be Peter! The Rock!”

Peter makes a confession about Jesus, and he is right! But only for a moment. Because Peter completely misunderstands what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. In the next story, Peter resists Jesus’ intention to go to Jerusalem and suffer. “Never, Lord!” Peter says in horror, “This shall never happen to you!”

Peter goes from being called “Blessed are you” to “Get behind me, Satan.” Peter may be pretty used to this. Peter attempts to walk on water and hears, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Peter didn’t understand a parable, and Jesus said to Peter, “Are you so dull?”

But in this moment, oh so brief, Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Let us bask in that moment recognizing God working through Peter. Note what Jesus says, “this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood (in other words, by another human being), but by my Father in heaven.” Yes, Peter tends to mess up mightily, but in this moment, God was at work in Peter. So, we are going to give thanks.

May I hear a “thanks be to God. “ (**Thanks be to God!**)

So, think about our attempts in answering Jesus’ question: Who do you say I am? We claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We ask every new member “Who is your Lord and Savior?” And they say together, “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.”

There are times when we don’t fully live out that confession and at times get confused what that confession really means. What does it mean for our lives? What does it mean for the church?

We are not a perfect church; we mess up sometimes as Peter did. So, if you are looking for the perfect church, it does not exist. However, to this very day Jesus continues to build his church on sinful human beings. The strength of the church is not the stability of its people, or that it has a lot of money, but on the trust we sinners have in an all-powerful God. Neither death nor the powers of evil can over-power this. As Jesus said in our passage, “the gates of Hell will not overcome the church.”

May I hear a “thanks be to God. “ **(Thanks be to God!)**

And then there are moments when we do something right, as Peter did, when things come together and we recognize God’s spirit at work within us and among us as individuals and the church.

While Pastor Craig is on vacation, I moderated Session last Thursday. I asked the elders to recognize where God was at work amongst us and what God is building upon this church. I heard such things as:

People are growing in their faith and deepening their relationship with God. We are keeping in contact with our members, and meeting any needs we find. Whenever we need to fix something on our building or pay bills or pay the staff, (who are amazing, by the way) the money is always there. We reach out to our neighbors and support other charity organizations so we can share the love of God that is in our hearts. I am sure you can come up with many more examples of God working amongst us. This was cause for celebration, and we gave thanks.

May I hear a “thanks be to God. “ **(Thanks be to God!)**

Then Jesus says something strange: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

What in the world does this mean? Think about keys. What do keys do? They lock someone or something up, and set someone or something free. I am sure you all have had the experience of someone getting locked out of a car (especially if it is running) or locked out of a house. The relief that happens when a key is found. It appears Peter, and therefore the church, is given the keys to lock someone up or to set them free.

What does this mean for Peter and for us as the church? I read all kinds of interpretations of this small passage. I am not going to get into them, but there is one interpretation I really like. The keys are tied to God’s forgiveness, which are not only ours to receive, but it is ours to extend and give away.

Have you ever asked for forgiveness from someone and it was withheld? The person would not forgive you?

Or, have you ever withheld forgiveness from someone, whether they sought it from you or not?

This is binding people to their sin. You are holding it over their head. It binds you up as this unforgiveness eats you up inside. We are called to set people loose by extending forgiveness and practicing reconciliation.

Forgiveness is the church's calling and one of the greatest gifts we can offer to the world and to one another. Did you know that it is contained in our church's mission statement? *To make Christ known through reconciliation while communicating respect and love to all people.*

We set people free, we set them loose, by extending forgiveness and practicing reconciliation.

We are entrusted with these keys of forgiveness. It is ours to receive as we stand in need of it. And it is ours to give away. Therefore, we join in the work of God. For what we do on earth matters and it has an impact in heaven and the atmosphere around us.

Hear it from the words of a child:

He was 5 years old. In his Sunday School class, they were learning the story of Joseph. They got to the part where Joseph reconciles with his brothers, and the teacher asked why we should forgive. The five year old raised his hand high in the air and said, "Because if we don't forgive, we will always be alone."

Apparently, he and his dad had shared this conversation just a few days before. He was angry with a friend who had chosen to sit with someone else on the school bus that morning. He went home and shared this hurt with his dad who told him, "If we don't forgive, we will always be alone."

Hear it from a former white supremacist:

This man was interviewed on TV for the news. When asked how he was able to leave his old life behind, he replies simply , “Kindness.” Arguments did not work. Violence only ignited his anger more deeply. But the repeated, intentional kindness and forgiveness of others pushed him to re-evaluate his life choices and today he can say the hatred he harbored so deeply is in his past.

Forgiveness matters, here on earth and in heaven. It is central to all that we are and hope to be. As we proclaim Jesus as our Christ, the one who has forgiven us, the very foundation on which we are built, the rock on which we stand, we proclaim and extend forgiveness in the name of this Messiah. Even when we mess up. This is God’s work amongst us.

Can I get a “thanks be to God. “ (**Thanks be to God!**)

Having heard these words, let us stand and proclaim Jesus as our Christ with the words of The Apostle’s Creed.