

Matthew 16:13-20

What's in a name? When your parents were preparing for your birth, they discussed what they would name you. Perhaps they would name you for a family member--a parent, grandparent or other relative. Perhaps they would name you for a family friend. Perhaps they would name you because they liked the sound of a particular name; a name they had heard or read in a book. Perhaps they checked-out a book of names from the library and explored the meanings of some potential names. Perhaps all of the above.

While many of us do not think about our names in this way, most, if not all names, have a meaning. Some names are related to nature, one's vocation, or one's hometown. Some have a religious or moral meaning. For example, Gloria means "Glory (to God), Justin means "Just," Ann means "Gracious or Merciful," Gregory means "Vigilant," Caroline means "Joy or Song of Happiness," Stephen means "Crown or wreath," Kathrine or Cathleen means "Pure One," George means "Tiller of the Soil or Farmer," Nalani means "Heavens," and Joel means "Yahweh is God." (Source--*Behind the Name*, and *Baby Names*, online)

In ancient times, a person's name was especially important. Even before meeting someone, by simply hearing their name, a person knew something about them. This is true in the Bible, as well. We recall the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah naming their son, John (whom we know as John the Baptist), in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 1. We recall the context, in that Zechariah's voice had been silenced. Scripture states--

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No, he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his [Zechariah's] mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child

become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him." (Luke 1:59-66, NRSV)  
In Matthew 1:23, Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us." In our passage today, Jesus is called the Messiah, which means "Anointed one." There are many other examples in the Bible of names being given because of their meaning. But the point is, that in ancient times, a name was more than what one person called another person.

Our Gospel passage for today is in the setting of Caesarea Philippi. It begins with Jesus asking the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They respond, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." (vs. 14)

If we explore the meanings of these names, we discover that John, means "YHWH has been gracious." Elijah, means "My God is Yahweh." Jeremiah, means "YHWH will raise." YHWH/YAHWEH means, "The God of the Israelites." Each of these names demonstrates a special relationship between the person and YHWH.

But, Jesus asks the disciples a second question that gets to the heart of his first question, "But, who do you say that I am?" This question moves beyond the meaning of one's name. It moves beyond who other people think Jesus is. It moves beyond the reality that Jesus could not be John, Elijah or Jeremiah, because they are no longer living on earth! Rather, Jesus is asking the disciples to speak for themselves about what they know about him; what they have seen, heard, and otherwise experienced during their time with Jesus. What have their experiences with Jesus told them about him? "But, who do you say that I am?"

Peter responds, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (vs. 17) Peter has responded in a way that goes beyond what humans would say, to get to the heart of who Jesus is. Jesus is the Messiah, the "anointed one", the Son of the Living God.

What the disciples have experienced through their interactions with Jesus is none other than God's revealing Godself to them through God the Son! Jesus is the Son of the Living God! When the disciples see, hear and experience Jesus' revelations, they see, hear and experience God!

Jesus states, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." (vs. 18) The meaning of Peter's name is "Rock," but his statement about Jesus expresses what is most important: Peter's acknowledgement of Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," is the basis, the foundation, on which God's church is built! God's church is built on what Christians believed in ancient times about Jesus. God's church is built on what Christians have believed throughout the past 2000 years--all the yesterdays and today. God's church is built on what Christians will believe in all the tomorrows, in all the days to come! God's church is built on the revelation and knowledge that God is a Living God! God is not only a name, but the Holy one whom all of us, each and every one of us who believe in God, has encountered!

What experiences can we describe that demonstrate God's work in our lives? Most of us can recall specific times when we have felt God's intervention, God's encounter, God's living presence with us. Perhaps it was a time when we sinned and asked God for forgiveness, and a weight seemed to be lifted from our shoulders. Perhaps it was a time when a loved one was ill, and they felt God's healing touch. Perhaps it was a time when we were far from home, feeling alone, and we experienced God's reassurance and calm. Perhaps it was through the workings of the Holy Spirit, as we set out to do things far beyond what we could ever do on our own. Each one of us has our own, unique experiences with the Living God that have shaped how we describe God and how God has been revealed to us! Through our gospel passage today, we are reminded that the Living God works in us and through us. When we stay connected to God

through hearing God's word, through prayer, through receiving the bread and wine, and through other means, God leads us and guides us in the way we should go.

This is the foundation of the church, as well. In our daily lives we experience others who are hungry, lonely, sick, naked, homeless, or otherwise without the necessities that they need to live and thrive. When we experience them, we can recall Jesus' words to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (vs. 20)

Far beyond the meaning of our names is the reality of how we live out our lives as followers of Jesus. Are we binding on earth based on prejudices, stereotypes, discrimination, or other injustices, or are we loosening based on equality, justice and peace? Do our actions point to the Living God being the one who is active in our lives? Jesus asks his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus, who died on the cross to atone for the sins of all humanity. Jesus, whose death and glorious resurrection gave all who believe in him forgiveness of sins. Jesus who offers us grace, salvation, and hope for the future. We have experienced God's gifts of forgiveness, grace, love, mercy and more, in our own lives. Because, in our hearts, we know who Jesus really is, "...the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Amen.