

## **Lent 2 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You may have noticed that people you know are specifying their personal pronouns. That's when you see someone put "*he, him, his*" next to their name, or "*they, them, theirs*" or "*she, her, hers*." People will do this in an email or on a business card or when they introduce themselves. Perhaps you do it yourself. It is a recent practice that derives from our changing ideas about gender identity. Someone who was born with the biology of a male may identify as a female. Someone who was born with the biology of a female may not identify as either male or female. Stating your preferred pronouns is a way of saying something about your identity. Or it may be a way of demonstrating solidarity and support with people who struggle to be accepted due to their gender identity.

If you meet someone who is questioning their gender or who has changed their gender identity from what was first printed on their birth certificate I encourage you to be compassionate. I encourage you to listen. I encourage you, in the words of a popular prayer, to seek not so much to be consoled as to console, to seek not so much to be understood as to understand. The theme of today's sermon is not gender identity and pronouns. But it is names. The burden and the promise of names. In our first reading to day, Sarai is renamed as Sarah. Abram is renamed as Abraham.

Do you like your name? Have you ever changed your name or thought about changing your name? Surely you have at least thought about it. Think of marriage. When a man and a woman are married, Does the woman replace her last name with her husband's last name? Or does she keep her own last name? Or does she hyphenate? When I was in seminary in the nineties, it was popular for both the husband and the wife to hyphenate. I had a classmate named Scott Taylor. He married a woman whose last name was Smith. So they both changed their last name to the hyphenated Smith-Taylor. This was in the nineties. Long before we had same-sex marriage. What do two women do with their names when they marry? Or two men? If you ask five same-sex couples, you'll get five different answers.

Names impose a great deal of society and its rules upon us. Traditionally— by that, I mean for a very few hundred years— in the English speaking world, women forfeited their last name, their family name, and took the family name of their husband. That says something about man and woman, about marriage, and the expectations and roles that are played. In the Spanish speaking world, children are given the last names of both the father and the mother. The president of

Mexico, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador carries his father's family name Lopez and his mother's family name Obrador but due to the way it works, Lopez and Obrador are the names of his two grandfathers. Naming conventions say something about society, and what it envisions for men, for women, for families. I'm not surprised that people often rebel against these traditions, which may not reflect them or their values or their own marriages and families.

You can change your name legally and permanently fairly simply and easily. But try getting people around you to honor your choice. Jesus himself famously said, "*Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*" [Mark 6:4] You may want to change your name to Randolph but your grandmother is still going to call you her little racoon. You may prefer to go by Dominic, but your high school buddies will always call you by your nickname: "Pizza Face." It seems like males and Latinos and military men are most likely to end up with insulting nicknames. Butt head. Shorty. Pinocchio. Stretch. And other names not suited for the pulpit.

Names impart an identity. And that identity might be something that you embrace wholeheartedly. Or it may be oppressive and completely inappropriate. If you are a Southern male who is named Alphonse Peter Beauregard Johnson IV, you may take great pride and joy in your name. But Alphonse Peter Beauregard Johnson IV might also impose pressures and expectations and family history that is a burden. The parents of Alphonse Peter Beauregard Johnson IV, which includes his father, who is likely to be Alphonse Peter Beauregard Johnson III, were making a statement about the importance of family and tradition when they chose that name. The parents of Thomas Michael Johnson chose solid Christian names. The parents of Mary Frances O'Connor chose good Catholic names. These names reflect the values and commitments and dreams of the parent. But do they reflect the values and commitments and dreams of the child?

In our gospel reading today, Jesus calls Peter "Satan." That did not become Peter's nickname, but it does say something about how Peter was affecting Jesus in that moment. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus has just finished renaming Simon— which was a common Jewish name— as Peter, which means rock. A name full of promise, and perhaps a sly commentary on Peter's personality. The apostle Paul will refer to Peter as Cephas, the Aramaic word for "rock," which indicates that the renaming of Simon as Peter was a very intentional and very well remembered event for the early Christians.

In our first reading, God renames Abram as Abraham, which means father of multitudes. It's a striking name, particularly because at this point in the story, Abram is 99 years old and has fathered children, but not with his wife Sarai. It's striking also because offspring signified everlasting life, that your life would be extended indefinitely by other means. The name "Sarah" basically means queen, and Sarah is specifically incorporated into this blessing, this covenant.

It's been noted that the change from Sarai to Sarah is only one letter, and from Abram to Abraham is only one syllable. God did not completely replace their names. God did not

completely disregard their history, their journey, the 99 years of Abram's accumulated living. God made a change, but it was continuous with the lives that had been lived up to that point.

One thing that we can learn from this very, very old story is that God is involved in our identities. God was involved with where we came from. And God is involved right now. The names that family and society impose upon us may not be authentic or appropriate. The names we choose for ourselves may not be authentic or appropriate. God is part of our origins. "In the beginning," it says. And God is part of our development and evolution. And God is part of our destiny. I'm fond of saying that when we baptize someone, we do not use their last name. Because baptism makes us part of God's family, not a part of the Johnson family. And baptism makes you a child of God, and me a child of God. And those are names that will not be taken from us.

When Abram and Sarai were given their new names, it reflected God's favor and God's promise for them. You and I may struggle with our names and our personal pronouns. People we care about may struggle with their names and personal pronouns. We are always in the process of becoming something new. And the power of Jesus to change Simon's name to Peter and the power of God to change Abram's name to Abraham signifies that God plays a part in our becoming something new. The human names that we choose and that our families choose may not reflect what God is doing. That's okay, because God is going to do what God is going to do. That's why in the Bible, he gets to be the one to change peoples' names.

What we learn from this very old story is to be open to how God sees things, and what he sees in you, and what he sees in the people around you. And to not let our labels and descriptions prevent us from seeing what God sees, hearing what God promises, and becoming what God plans. Amen.