

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2020

(Matthew 16:13-20)

As a priest, one of the most important moments for me during a service of Holy Baptism is when I ask the parents and godparents to name the child being christened, inviting them to speak it aloud before the entire assembly. While the name may have already been shared with many, unless the entire congregation has been told beforehand that portion of the service becomes a special moment for the gathered community.

Historically, a name was not given at birth but rather officially bestowed on a child at the baptism service, although the timing of baptisms in centuries past was typically much closer to the day of birth. Today, several months may transpire between birth and baptism, but that was not always the case. The Church of England in past centuries mandated that christenings be held swiftly. The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, for instance, includes this direction:

*The pastours amd curates shall oft admonyshe the people, that they differ [defer] not the Baptisme of infantes any longer then the Sondaye, or other holy daye, nexte after the chylde bee borne, onlesse upon a great and reasonable cause declared to the curate and by hym approved.*<sup>1</sup>

Here, in the early years of the Episcopal Church, our prayer book held a similar instruction for parents:

*The Minister of every Parish shall often admonish the People, that they defer not the Baptism of their Children, longer than the first or second Sunday next after their Birth, or other Holy-day falling between, unless upon a great and reasonable Cause.*<sup>2</sup>

Out of a sense of personal curiosity, I spent some time looking to see how much time a family is allowed today before a child is named. In the case of my children, Amy and I had names selected before leaving the hospital. There's no great uniformity in the requirements, however; different states have different directions, ranging from a few days to a few weeks. In Ohio, I was stunned to discover, a birth must be registered within 10 days but parents have up to *one year* to file a supplemental report in which the child's name is provided.

Names are important. Identity is important. Our given names reveal – legally – who we are; our surnames identify the family of which we are part. But names are labels in many respects useful for others. Our names allow people to know who we are – but how do they know *whose* we are?

In today's Gospel reading *name* and *identity* hold a central place of importance. First, Jesus questions his disciples about how those in the wider community – those outside of this close-knit circle – identify him. He asks them the first of the two questions I just singled

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<sup>1</sup> From "Of Them That Be Baptized in Private Houses in Tyme of Necessitie" in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*.  
[http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Baptism\\_1549.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Baptism_1549.htm)

<sup>2</sup> From "The Ministracion of Private Baptism of Children in Houses" in the 1790 *Book of Common Prayer*.  
<https://archive.org/details/bookommray00epis/page/n5/mode/2up>

out, that of who he is. The names given in response – Elijah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist – are those of great prophets, names of individuals from the ancient past of their faith and one more recent figure who had been known personally by many. Identifying him as a prophet was a correct albeit incomplete perspective, one that put him in a category that had already been defined.<sup>3</sup> It is only when the disciples themselves are asked who *they* think Jesus is that both questions are answered, who he is *and* whose he is. “You are the Messiah” – proper name – and “the Son of the living God” – the one from whom he came and of whom he is a part.

Then the spotlight is turned away from Jesus and toward the one who to this point we have known as Simon, the one proclaiming both *who* and *whose* Jesus was (and is). Simon had a name; his friends, his family and his community knew him by that name as well as his being the son of Jonah. They knew him by his legal name and the name of the family of which he was a part. Because of the group in which he traveled, the world also would have known *whose* he was: his life and his existence had been given over to Jesus.

But with his deep, divinely-inspired revelation about Jesus, he receives a new name – a new identity by which the world would know *him* and *who* he served. With the same definitive statement about Jesus’ identity, and in a parallel to that earlier proclamation, Jesus now renames his friend. Before the echo of “*You are the Messiah*” has faded, we now hear “*You are Peter*.”<sup>4</sup> This fisherman, as a result of a God-given insight into the truth about his teacher, has in an instant had his identity – the way people would know him – changed from that of *follower* to that of *foundation*.

So *who* are we? *Whose* are we? In this sacred place of community and worship, the answers are somewhat easy to come by. We know one another’s names and to some extent we know the earthly families of which we are part. Even with that, though, we must consider – along with our names and identities – how our *actions* identify *who* and *whose* we are. Self-reflection is important and sometimes difficult; discernment may reveal to us things that we don’t like and that must be changed. But to fully live into our identities as Christians and children of God, these are things we *must* do.

We often recite together the words of the Baptismal Covenant and promise to respect the dignity of *every human being*. Do the words we speak or the actions we take towards our sisters and brothers in God’s family reflect that?

We remember the two great commandments shared by Jesus, the second of which is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Do our words and actions reflect the equality of that love, or is it possible that we slip more often than we would like and put ourselves just *a bit above* everyone else?

We pray that divisions may cease and that each of us, you and I – *without exception* – may live as one. Do our words and actions reflect our desire to achieve that and to be peacemakers and bridge builders, or is it possible that we are consumed by emotion more than we would like and as a result find ourselves saying or doing things to widen divisions just *a bit more*?

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<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 424.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, p. 426.

When we desire nothing more than certainty and comfort and firm answers about life and yet things don't go the way we want or hope or take us away from the comfortable, do we take time to prayerfully reflect on why and try to discern the deeper reasons or causes behind things, or do we lash out from a place of nothing more than our own sense of feeling inconvenienced and uncomfortable?

The prophet Micah challenges us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.<sup>5</sup> Are we kind and just and humble, or do we sometimes find ourselves slipping and seeing that perhaps we're not in the mood to be kind – to ourselves or one another – or don't think justice is warranted?

These questions and many, many more are part of the important self-reflection and discernment we must do. Yes, again I acknowledge and admit it's hard, but it's necessary if we are to give a true representation to those around us of *who* and *whose* we are. There's a popular song that was written in the 1960s that I'm sure many of you know, "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." The lyrics are simple but important and include particular admonitions: "We pray that all unity will one day be restored ... We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand ... We will work side by side ... We'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride."<sup>6</sup> We may sing those words, but do we actually live what we sing?

I am Matt. I am a Christian. I am an Episcopalian. I am a child of God. Are the words I pray *here* reflected in my actions *out there*?

Who does the world say *you* are? And through your actions, *whose* does the world say *you* are?

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<sup>5</sup> Micah 6:8 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Lyrics to "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love," <https://wordtoworship.com/song/14526>.