

A New Name

[John 1:40-42](#)

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You remember the old American Express ads: "You don't know me so I carry an American Express card. I don't leave home without it." As if to imply not having that card, I wouldn't have an identity when I left home. When the Bethlehem congregation commissioned me to come to The National Presbyterian Church, they were concerned that I needed an out if things didn't work out here. So they gave me a t-shirt: "You don't know me because I'm a part of the Federal Witness Protection Program." Someone else said, "You're going to need more than a t-shirt to hide your identity, Gareth!"

Naming is a very important part of being a human being. In Genesis, Chapter 2, we see that Adam was given the opportunity to name the animals one by one. As God brought the animals to him, he looked at their natures and gave each a name according to its nature. In the Hebrew tradition, there was always an intimate connection between the name and the true nature of the person. Parents give children names for a purpose. Sometimes a name reflects a hope or expectation, a value or memory, a calling or a destiny, a dream, a goal, an inheritance, a friendship, a hope to carry on the family name with a certain special quality that might exist in this person who is developing.

In our family, we wanted to send some signals to our children as they grew up, so we decided to give them a clear statement that we preferred classical music: we named our first two cats Beethoven and Mozart. We never got to Bach because the children decided to name the cats something else. We decided we wanted our daughters to have names that sounded strong and assertive, so we named them Tamara and Tanya. We wanted them to grow up with a strong sense of their leadership abilities.

My Mother was on a "W" kick for the first three sons. The first son is Wendell, the second Weston and she was going to name the third son Weldon. But she started reading the Knights of the Round Table and fell in love with Sir Gareth and decided to name me Gareth Weldon instead. Now some of you know there is a certain prophetic air to that because my Dad is 5'8" and I grew up to be 6'6". Sir Gareth was head and shoulders taller than the rest of the knights.

When John the Baptist was pointing to Jesus, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God." And as the disciples of John began to follow Jesus, Jesus turned and looked at them, and in Peter's case, he took a long look at Peter as if to profoundly understand his deepest nature. After examining him carefully for an extended period of time he said, "Yes, today you are Simon, the son of John, but tomorrow, you will be Peter, the son of God." He understood Peter to be the one who would be called to something new and different than Simon had been living.

This past week we had a chance to be in an all-church retreat where Dr. Scott Sonquist called us into the letter of 1 Peter to tell us about our Christian identity. He started out by pointing to the Peter's instruction at the beginning of the letter where he states the clear identity he has in Jesus Christ. Peter, who is an apostle of Jesus Christ, the one who is sent by Jesus. Peter, who is chosen and destined by God the Father. Peter, who is sanctified by the Spirit. Peter, who is obedient to Jesus Christ. Peter who is sprinkled in the blood of Jesus Christ as if to say I've been there when people have died because of Jesus. Peter's identity was clearly defined by Jesus, by his relationship to the Father and the coming of the Spirit. When Jesus names Simon Peter, he is delivering some clear statements to Simon about his new identity in God. God adopts him; God chooses him and claims him. God is taking possession and responsibility for him. As Jesus walks with Peter, Jesus expects that this Simon will become Peter. You've heard the expression that blood runs thicker than water. In the scriptures, the implied expression is that the Spirit runs thicker than blood. The Spirit will transform you and change you into the new image of who God wants you to become. You are not locked into who you have been in the past.

When our children reach teenage years, they tend to divorce us and move on to other families or gangs.

Fortunately, they don't divorce us completely, but they do tend to leave home. They do so partly to find their own identities. That's part of the discovery of the true name of who they are. My brother, who has a totally different physique than I, became a gymnast in high school. He was adopted into a family of gymnasts, called the Rock family. His friend was Rusty Rock (I don't know why his parents named him that). So my brother adopted out of the Icenogles into the Rocks. He became a person who was preoccupied with building his body, solid like a rock. And he lived into that. The family and the gymnasts would gather in summertime and go up to Bass Lake, where a previous pastor lives to this day by the name of Louie Evans. At night they would tie up ropes in the trees around the lake and swing out across the lake in the moonlight over unsuspecting couples who were out there alone, frightening them with Tarzan yells. The more you hear about my family, the more you are going to wonder if you made a good choice.

We are adopted into a new identity in the family of God. Simon, meaning the one who hears, becomes Peter the Rock, the one who is deeply founded in who Jesus is. Peter knows the rock of ages. And the rock recognizes the strength in Peter if he would live into the grace that he knows in Jesus Christ. We know that wonderful interchange between Peter and Jesus at Caesarea Philippi when Peter finally gets it right. Jesus says, "Who do you say I am?" And Peter replies "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus says, "Flesh and blood does not reveal that to you but God, my Father in heaven, has made that true for you. Blessed are you Simon, son of John (old name). You are now Petrus the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." That is an amazing statement for somebody who is ambivalent and fuzzy at best as Simon.

Upon this rock is the key question: Who do you say I am? When you answer that question, you enter into a relationship with the rock. Another part of the rock involves the great confession Peter makes at this point: You are the Christ, the son of the living God. Upon that rock I will build my church. We often forget that it is in the change of Peter and the change and sanctification of those who follow Jesus, it is in the rock of the changed man, that Jesus will build his church. Simon no longer will be Simon; he will be Peter the Rock. God builds the church upon living stones: people who change, people who are not the same as they used to be. God invites us into new life to demonstrate our new name. He beckons us to a new nature, completes our giftedness to the full extent as we walk with Jesus Christ. There is a new creation, a new birth, a new family and purpose that we enter into when following Jesus. We are committed to change, to become, to be formed into the image of Christ, to be transformed into the fullness of who God is. To be sanctified, made holy, complete, to become mature. There is a lifelong process of growth. Jesus expected Simon to become Peter. Jesus invited Simon to become Peter.

Now one of the things we are invited by Jesus to do in the church is to participate in this ministry of transformation. We are expected as we follow Jesus to invite people to change. To expect people to change, work to help them change, we hold them accountable to change. We model change in our own lives; we call attention to the one who make things happen in Jesus. We participate in lifelong change. And we reject the lie that you cannot change. Have you ever said, "Oh, he will never change." If you say that, you are betraying the very theology upon which this church is built, which is the gospel invites and helps people change. If you believe in your own heart that you cannot change, you've accepted a lie.

If you follow Jesus Christ, there is built into that relationship the expectation and power for you to change. Are you a different and better person today than you were five years ago? Are you improving, becoming wiser, more whole, more balanced, more healthy in your spirit. Spiritual and emotional health go hand in hand. We should be getting healthier as we grow. What do the ones around you say about you? What about your spouse, is he or she complimenting you on how you've changed for the better? Are your children noting that you have changed, and God has transformed your life? I think some of us deep down inside really buy into that staid, old lie of Presbyterian theology that says, we are so immersed into depravity, we can't change. Don't believe it. Yes, we are depraved but Jesus, having saved us, wants to change us. As Peter says in his letter to the church: Come to Jesus who is the living stone and behave like living stones. Let yourself be built into a spiritual house, be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices because you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, you are God's very own people. You have a new identity; so live into it.

Now, I realize in the process of change, the old and the new live right next to each other. This can be

rather disturbing at times. The old is going away and the new is coming. The old is dying and the new is growing. The shifting sand is becoming solid rock; it doesn't happen overnight. The sinking one is the one who will walk on water, the denying one is the one who will proclaim, the fallen one is the one who raises others, and the one who creates roadblocks begins to move mountains. So the old impetuous Peter becomes the thoughtful Peter. The volatile, vocal, outspoken, impulsive, weak, cowardly, aggressive, simplistic fisherman becomes the intentional, daring, bold, courageous, fearless, humble, reflective Apostle. It is so that Peter heard very clearly Jesus teaching the Sermon on the Mount. At the very end of that sermon, Jesus is contrasting the difference between one who builds a house upon the sand, and one who builds a house upon rock. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them," Jesus says, "will be like a wise man who builds his house on rock, and everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who builds his house on sand." Simon is the hearer, that's the meaning of his name, and you can almost see Simon resonating with that and saying, "I did it, Jesus, I've become a man of action." Faith without action is dead.

Yes, Peter makes mistakes. The old lives with the new. The old Peter shows up, but the new Peter is supposed to be there. There's Peter in Antioch where he is confronted by Paul. Peter's been eating with Gentiles but when his Jewish brothers come into town, he doesn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. Paul says, you hypocrite, you double-minded person. Even as an apostle, Peter made mistakes. That ought to give all of us a lot of comfort. The rock was still flimsy at times. There's Peter with Jesus at Caesarea of Philippi: You are the Christ, the son of the living God. Peter, you've got it. Now I must go to Jerusalem and die. Won't you come with me? Oh Lord, you've got it wrong. Jesus turns to this very person and says, get behind me Satan. The Presbyterian version would be, "get the hell out of here." Peter, walking on water steps, out of the boat and notices he's walking on the water and begins to sink. He cries out, Lord, save me. Peter says, I'll never deny you, Lord. You'll deny me three times, Jesus says. And he did. The old and the new living side by side that's where all of us live, between the person we used to be and the person we are yet to become because God is changing us. We're not perfect.

How did Jesus turn Simon into Peter? With the long-term relationship and a long journey, a vision of who he could become that he called him to him day after day. A consistent modeling of life, a constant confrontation of his mistakes, an appropriate affirmation when he did the right thing, focused teaching, faith that has kept in him all the way to the end and even beyond the end in the resurrection. Speaking constantly to him the truth in a loving way. Moments of empowerment. Jesus never gave up on Peter. And in the resurrection, Jesus bids Peter to come back and be who he could become and not to wallow in his mistakes. When Jesus names Simon Peter, he declares an end point out of the future. That the new name signifies a life target. You will become a rock for the church, an ultimate goal, a finish line, an end point, Peter you will grow to maturity and your maturity will be powerfully effective in the lives of others. You will have wholeness in your humanity, your giftedness will be unleashed, and you will affect thousands of people. You can just see Jesus looking at Peter as Simon and saying, this man has greatness in him, but he looks terrible right now. God who begins the work will complete it.

I met Bill at a retreat center not too many weeks ago. He told me a story: he had been the kind of man who had expected his wife to wait on him hand and foot, day after day, month after month. He got into a men's group and they started talking about how Jesus calls us to change and they had heard about Bill's demanding everything of his wife. Bill, you know this isn't the new way. If you want to live into Jesus, you must become a servant to your wife, and that caught his attention. So he began to live the next ten years of their marriage as her servant. And he told me in tears that it was the best ten years he had ever lived with his wife and the last three she had cancer. And I couldn't wait to wait on her in her pain. Bill changed from being a tyrant to a servant.

I met Sam at the airport a few weeks ago. Sam told me the story of how he had been involved with drugs, how he was ready to go into partnership with another drug lord. And for some reason he decided that it wasn't a good idea. A week later, the fellow he was planning to go into business with was driven over a cliff by the Mafia. He realized that God had spoken to him. You will not be the same person, Sam, in the future. Instead of being a person who is preoccupied with addiction to drugs, I want you to save people from a drug habit, I want you to be in recovery and help others to recover. And his life changed.

One of my favorite hymns by Charles Wesley goes like this: " Breathe, oh breathe, my loving spirit into

every troubled breast, let us all of the inherit, let us find the promised rest. Take away our love of sinning, alpha and omega be, the beginning and the end. Into faith as it's beginning, set our hearts at liberty." But even more powerfully, "finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be, let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee. Change from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Somehow we Presbyterians are a little fearful of that neo-Wesleyan theology that says we can get better. The grace of God comes to us so that we get better, healthier and stronger. I heard a sad story the other day, the wedding of a couple that I did about five years ago. The woman came to me in shock; her husband had died from stomach cancer after just discovering it and in a few days he was gone. She had lost her husband but the more terrible thing was she had discovered the truth on his deathbed, where he was trying to tell her about another life he had had the entire time he was married to her, and she didn't know it. And before he could finish speaking he lost the ability to speak. He tried to write it out but he couldn't finish his confession. But I must tell you before I die, I've not been truthful with you. Don't wait till the bitter end to let the grace of God change your life, because sometimes at the bitter end point, the grace will speak to you in such a way that all you will have left is to confess the old and you've never participated in the new. What a tragedy. Let God change your life.

Amen.