

**"A New Name"**

**Genesis 32:22-31**

**August 20, 2017**

**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

I want you to think for a moment about your name. Do you like your name? Your first name, I mean. Your given name, what is sometimes called your Christian name. Can you think of yourself with a different one? If you had to pick another name for yourself, what would it be? Many of you know that our friend here Murray Cooper's middle name is Michael, and once upon a time, when he was much younger, he used to go by Michael. That's the way his wife first knew him, in fact, she still calls him "Michael." Sometimes I have to think for a moment when we are talking and she refers to something Michael did or said. Who is she talking about? That's not the name I know. Probably fewer of you know that our friend Zip Fiordalis does not really have the given name of "Zip." His real name is Gary. But he's been called "Zip" since he was a little boy, so even he doesn't answer to Gary. My great-great-grandfather was named William Jennings, and my great grandfather was also William Jennings, and my grandfather was also William Jennings. But my grandfather, for some reason unknown to me, went by the name "Pete." Maybe to distinguish him from all those other Williams. When I came along, my parents gave me the middle name of William after my grandfather, and I suppose after all those other Williams. But for a while they tried to call me "Little Pete," but for some reason it just didn't stick. It didn't suit me. It wasn't my name and so they dropped it.

In our culture we think about naming our children a name that we like, does it suit them and our family, or we name our children after someone else, in memory of them or to honor them. But in the ancient world, names had meaning. Remember Jacob's grandfather, Abram—which means "exalted father." But when God makes a covenant with him, to build from him and Sarah a great nation, he changes his name to Abraham—which means "father of a multitude." When Abraham and Sarah are told that in

their old age they will have a son, they laugh at the craziness of it. So when that son arrives they name him Isaac—which means “laughter.” Names have meaning. For far from merely identifying a person, names in Jacob’s culture reveal one’s essential character and sometimes their destiny. And so, to know a person’s name is to have a certain power over that person, for no matter what he or she says or does, you can reply, “Hey! -- You can’t get away with that; I *know* you.”

Now Jacob’s name means the usurper, the supplanter, or, more loosely, the cheat, for he is the one who came from his mother’s womb already grabbing his brother’s heel. And how appropriate a name it is, for all of his life Jacob has devoted his energy and wit to usurping what rightfully belongs to others. That is, Jacob at heart is nothing more than a fraud, a common trickster, charlatan, and scoundrel. And deep down, I think, Jacob knows this. Remember how he buys the birthright of the first born from his older brother for a bowl of stew? And he cheats his brother out of the blessing that was intended for him by pretending to be Esau to their nearly blind father. And when he runs away to live for the next 20 years with his uncle Laban, he cheats Laban out of the best of his sheep and goats, so that when he is finally ready to go home, he goes as a rich man. Jacob, the cheater, who has gotten everything in his life by a trick or a lie or a cheat.

In the scene immediately before the events we just heard described, Jacob has left Laban’s and is traveling back home, when he receives word that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. What can he do? Esau must still be holding a grudge, he must still hate Jacob because of that stolen blessing. What can he do? Jacob hides away half of his wealth, and then, with what is left, he sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau, intending to bribe his way back into his brother’s good graces. This Sunday’s reading picks up the narrative just as Jacob, fearful that all his plans and schemes will come to naught, sends the rest of his servants

and family across the river, hoping, perhaps, that even if Esau refuses his tribute he may, at least, take pity on Jacob at the sight of his defenseless wives and children.

And then it happens.... Pacing by the dark and troubled river and accompanied only by his own frustrated schemes and feeble contingencies, Jacob is attacked by someone. He can't tell who—maybe it is an angel or maybe a demon. Maybe it is the god of the river, maybe it is Esau come to take his revenge. All night long the two wrestle, until, as daylight approaches and they seem to have fought to a standoff, his opponent dislocates his hip. Like he could have done this all along and now that the sun is about to rise, he extends his power and Jacob is helpless. But Jacob holds on to him for dear life, unable to do anything else until the stranger demands to be released. “Bless me, first,” Jacob cries, perceiving that, whether demon or angel, this is no ordinary creature. To which his adversary, soon to be revealed as the Lord, responds, “Tell me your name.”

His name. What is his name? I imagine at this point he is ashamed. He says his name, “I’m Jacob, the supplanter, the cheat, the liar, the one who takes what is not his own.” It’s like a confession. And perhaps he expects condemnation. Here it comes. Jacob is finally going to get what he deserves after all these years. Except ... except that in the face of Jacob’s confession of his name, the Lord -- far from doling out the punishment Jacob both certainly merits and probably expects -- the Lord gives Jacob a new name. He calls him Israel, the one who has wrestled with God and with human beings and has prevailed. And so the scene concludes with Jacob limping away from this contest not defeated but victorious, carrying a new name and character and living life as a new person. For not only will Jacob and Esau be reconciled in the chapters to come, but Jacob will also sire a nation from his twelve sons and they and their descendants proudly bear his name even to this day.



Did you think about your name back at the beginning? Did you think about all your names? Who are you? Really. What is your name? What is it that others call you? Father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, those are easy. Democrat, Republican, Independent, maybe you don't always speak those names so loudly. Teacher, student, business owner, chef, tinker, tailor, soldier, maybe one of your names is what you do. Presbyterian, visitor, church-shopper, non-denominationalist. // More importantly, what is it that you call yourself? // Maybe you have names that are more difficult. What name is it that you are afraid of? What name are you afraid for others to know? What is that name you can barely whisper in your mind? Scoundrel, cheat, or phony like Jacob? Unworthy, irresponsible, selfish? Discouraged or burnt-out? Divorced, deserted, or widowed? Coward or bully? Unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Jacob walks away from his encounter with God with his humanity wounded, he limps away, but with a new name, Israel. And that's exactly what happens with us. We don't use the word too much in our church, but that's what happens in baptism, or as they say in some traditions, christening. Christ-ening. When you are baptized, you are Christ-ened. That's when a new name is given to us, the name of Christ. Once a month or so when Murray stands up here after the Prayer of Confession, he announces the assurance of pardon by using the words from II Corinthians, "anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old life has passed away, a new life has begun." Jacob walks away from his encounter with God having received God's blessing. And God blessed him not because he had earned it, or because he had stolen it, or because he was clever enough to get it, but only because God gave it, out of grace, out of love. He walks away with a new name, Israel, leaving the old name behind.

As Christians we have a newness of life, all those old names can be left behind because we are given the name of Christ. Lots of people around the nation were upset by the demonstrations and

violence that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. I was too, but I have to tell you that one of the things that upset me most was something that hasn't been mentioned too much. It was incredibly upsetting and repulsive to have people in our country marching with Nazi flags and chanting anti-Semitic and racist slogans. But so many of them did it while carrying the name of Christ. Many of them said they wanted a white Christian nation, the Klan claims to be followers of Christ, some of the supremacists will say they want a Protestant nation with no room for those of other religions or races. That's exactly the opposite of what Christ teaches us. If we look back into the Hebrew scriptures, we have seen that Abraham sees God as his God, Isaac sees God as the god of his father and himself, Jacob now sees God as the god of his family. Those who hear this story see God as the god of their nation. At every step through history, more and more people are included in the family of God. In Jesus time, the disciples are stretched to see that God's love is inclusive of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and if they think about it, inclusive of all people. To bear the name of Christ, to call ourselves Christian means to represent Christ. It upsets me if people use the name of Christ to exclude or to hate.

When we walk out those doors we bear the name of Christ out into the world. We are his representatives, that's the new name we've been given. We show the world what Christ is like. What are we showing them? What are we showing each other? Do we bear the name of Christ to each other? Do we show loving kindness and forgiveness and forbearance. As Paul says in Romans: "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another." Is that us? It should be if we bear the

name of Christ. It should be the character of all who wear the name of Christ.

David Lose says, “Names, as we know, can limit us, hurt us, even kill. But so also can they heal and make alive. And so, a part of what we do each week, I believe, is to invite people to come and be reminded once again of our true name and new identity so that we may go out into the world as new persons, as God’s own beloved child.”<sup>1</sup> So may it be.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lose, David. *The Power of Names*. Working Preacher, October 14, 2013.