Matthew 3:13-17

**January 18, 2017; Baptism of the Lord**

**Caroline M. Kelly**

She wanted to believe that a name was just a name. Their relationship depended on it.

In Shakespeare’s tragic comedy, she (Juliet) had fallen in love with Romeo, a man from a family that had long been feuding with her own; their family’s enmity destined to come between them. But Juliet, a member of the Capulet family, refuses to believe that Romeo’s identity as a Montague could really keep them apart.

In the best known scene from the play, Juliet argues passionately that Romeo’s identity is irrelevant when it comes to their love for one another. From the balcony overlooking her family’s garden, Juliet speaks:

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part.  
O be some other name belonging to a man.

What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name which is no part of thee  
Take all myself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Juliet wants, with all her heart, to believe that names are unimportant; that they have neither the power to shape one’s identity or destiny. The play proves otherwise. Their lives come to a tragic end when they discover that the only way they can be together is in death.

We, too, experience the power names can wield, from a young age. Take the popular children’s rhyme we recite when we want to console someone who has been called names by another. We say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” to encourage the child to buck up and ignore the taunts, despite the hurt that names can cause.

I experienced the power of names through my relationship with the men who lived in gymnasium at the church I served in Atlanta. It was common to hear people refer to the men simply as “the homeless.” Whether we intended to or not, our choice to refer to them this way had the effect of dehumanizing them, making it easier to maintain our distance or look down on them.

I hated the way the term “the homeless” portrayed these men as if they were some indistinguishable mass whose sole identity consisted in their lack of housing, and began, instead, to refer to them as the men who lived in the night shelter or as people who were experiencing homelessness. The difference in the choice of names was palpable.

Emphasizing their personhood rather than their homelessness shifted the focus from what made us different to what we had in common. Soon I came to learn their stories – about their families, their jobs, their hopes and their dreams for the future. I learned their given names and even began to call some of them my friends.

A name is *not* just a name. It can have a big impact on the way you see yourself and those around you.

One writer observes,

We are at a time and place where so many would like to identify and define us by many, many names: Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight, rich or poor, Black or White, and the list goes on. Additionally, we are also and increasingly named and defined by the products we use or the stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany, Hallmark – these are not just company names, but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars, and computers convey a great deal of our identity. As [one article on branding](https://today.duke.edu/2010/09/brandreligion.html) puts it:

For people who aren’t deeply religious, visible markers of commercial brands are a form of self-expression and a token of self-worth, just like symbolic expressions of one’s faith.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Despite the many names that seek to define our identify, as baptized Christians, we derive our primary identity from our relationship with God. Throughout the Bible, you see examples of this.

At the end of Isaac’s wrestling match with God, God gives him a new name: Israel, and with it his new identity as the father of the nation with whom God will develop a very special relationship. When Simon becomes the first disciple to call Jesus the Messiah, Jesus, in turn, gives Simon a new name: Peter, and with it his new identity as the one on whom Jesus will build his new community, the church.

In today’s story, after Jesus is baptized by John, God calls Jesus “the Beloved.” In his baptism, God claims and names Jesus as God’s own. Likewise, in our baptisms, God claims and names each of us a beloved child of God. We may go by many other names -- Caroline, wife, sister, pastor, Davidson Wildcat, bossy, perfectionist -- but it is the name we receive in our baptism that shapes our primary identity and purpose.

Because we are baptized, we are given the incredible security of knowing that we have been claimed and will be companioned by none other than the Holy One of Israel: the one who created the world, who liberated our ancestors in the faith from slavery and led them into the promised land; who loves and holds each and every one of us and who will never let us go.

It is said that the great reformer, Martin Luther, whenever he faced trouble or doubt, would put his hand on his head and say to himself, “I am baptized.”

As we start this New Year together, I encourage you to remember, whenever you face trouble or doubt, that you, too, are baptized. Put your hand on your head and remind yourself every once in a while: “I am baptized. I belong to God and God loves me, no matter what.”

I also want to challenge you to be intentional about living into your baptism. While God is the one who initiates a relationship with you in baptism, your identity as a child of God is also a calling; a calling to live a new kind of life, one in which you have committed yourself to follow Jesus, to continually study what that means and to put it into practice every day.

So what does that mean?

We get a clue from this story about the baptism of Jesus. While there’s a lot of speculation about why Jesus would participate in a baptism of repentance when he had nothing to repent of, Jesus tells us this is the way it needs to be. He must be baptized, he says, to fulfill all righteousness.

In other words, this is what God wants and he must submit to God’s desire for him. By doing so, he demonstrates his solidarity with us in baptism. And, more to the point, he demonstrates the kind of ministry to which the baptized are commissioned. It will not be about what he wants, but about what God wants.

For us, that means that our ministry, too, must be about discerning and submitting to God’s will for us, both as individuals and as a community of faith. God never promises that it will be easy. But, in our baptisms, God has named and claimed us as God’s own, speaking our names in love, the name we remember as today we recommit ourselves to live as baptized people: “You are the beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

Yes, it is only a name, but it means everything.

Thanks be to God!

1. *Romeo and* Juliet (2.2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Lose, “Baptism of our Lord: A Family Name” from *In the Meantime* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)