

Proper 24 C
Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8
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What Is in a name?
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Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to the chosen ones who cry out day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, justice will be granted quickly to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

~O~

In his immortal tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare tells the story of star-crossed lovers whose passion for one another transcends the strife between their two families, the Capulets and the Montagues, divided by generations of bitter enmity. Juliet says:

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

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose,
By any other word would smell as sweet.*

What is in a name? Juliet insists that names don't define us. But do they? Would we still be ourselves with another name? Does our name define who we are or predict what others can expect from us? Does it limit our capacity for good or unleash our capacity for evil? Maybe there's more in a name than Juliet admits.

Both the text from Luke and the one from Genesis emphasize persistence. But Jacob's persistence leads not to getting what he wants—as the widow does in Jesus' parable—but to something he never could have expected: a new name. To understand the significance of this event, we also need to understand the weight of his old name. In the ancient Near East, names were not just identifiers; they revealed something essential about a person's nature.

When Jacob and his twin brother Esau were born, Jacob came from the womb clinging to Esau's heel. His name means “the supplanter” or “the cheat,” and Jacob lived into his name. He tricked his hungry brother out of his birthright for a bowl of stew. When their father was old and blind, Jacob cheated Esau out of the family blessing by disguising himself as Esau so their father would bless him instead. Later, Jacob cheated his father-in-law out of much of his wealth.

Now, all of Jacob's scheming seems to be catching up with him. Esau is on his way—presumably to settle the score—and Jacob fears for his life and the lives of his family. After sending his caravan across the river, Jacob remains behind alone. That's when a man appears, and the wrestling match begins.

When it appears that Jacob will triumph, the man injures Jacob's hip. Still, Jacob won't yield. So the stranger blesses him and gives him a new name: Israel—“one who has wrestled with God and with humans and prevailed.” Jacob leaves the scene, victorious, limping, having seen (he believes) the very face of God, and bearing a new name. Soon he will be reconciled

with his brother, and his children will become a people who bear that name: the ones who wrestle with God. Sorry, Juliet—names do matter.

Beyond the name, I think many of us resonate with Jacob—the God-wrestler. I suspect that many of us are here at New England Church because it’s okay to wrestle with faith here. As “thinking people,” we generally reject too-easy answers to the big questions. We’re committed to a version of faith that feels authentic, that stands up in the light of real-world knowledge and real-world problems—faith that we’ve often arrived at after no small amount of wrestling. For many of us, our faith continues to change and grow as the wrestling match continues. And yet, we find strength in wrestling with faith together, in a community shaped by Jesus’ vision for our human family and our world.

In a way, Jesus went through a name change of his own. During his lifetime, he wasn’t commonly known as “the Christ”—the anointed one or messiah. Only those closest to him used the title, and Jesus discouraged them from telling others. It was only after the crucifixion and resurrection that his followers began to widely refer to him as Jesus Christ or simply “the Christ,” believing he fulfilled the messianic promises of the Hebrew Scriptures.

When we commit to the way of Jesus, we submit to a kind of name change, too. Not only are we reminded that we are beloved children of God, but we also take on the name *Christian*—Christ-follower—and that new name reveals something of our essential character. I know the word “Christian” can carry baggage in our world today. It’s often been co-opted in ways that don’t reflect the radical love of Jesus. But here, in this community, we have the chance to live it differently.

Following Jesus, we commit to living like him: healing broken people and communities; bringing wholeness and hope to our world; radically welcoming others into caring community without judgment; reaching out in love to those on the margins of society; and lifting our voices to power on behalf of those who have been silenced. Our new name confirms us as beloved and commissions us for Jesus’ work in the world.

What is in a name? For us, it's everything. Friends, you are first and foremost *beloved*. That is your first name. But your second name is *Christian*. And if we bear that name, let's keep learning, growing, and loving in ways that show the world what it truly means.

May it be so. Amen