

The Power of a Name

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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When I was growing up I was always called by my middle name, Casey, which is a thing that southerners do, since my dad was also Michael Woolf with a different middle name. As I went through college, I started wanting to use my first name more and more, but when you have a name that you've never used before, it just feels weird. And so I would go to a Starbucks and they were a bit bigger on asking for your name back then and writing it, and I would say that my name was Michael, just to try it on, just to see how it felt to be Michael Woolf, because that was my dad's name really in my mind. That was my first introduction to gingerly using a name that had technically been my first on documents that I had to fill out since I was little. Now, no one except my parents and a close collection of friends from college uses the name Casey – I'm Michael now, but I always was Michael, but I wasn't. So names can be tricky. They can be markers of intimacy, of people who "know" us and who don't know us. They can be agonized over, they can be us claiming a new identity, or us claiming an old identity, they can represent a break from the past and a celebration of it.

And names have power. Never forget the story of Odysseus, who told the Cyclops that he was "nobody," afraid to give him his name. After blinding him, he tells him who he actually is, an action that causes many problems for the adventurers later on, since the Cyclops is Poseidon's son and now can ask his father to get vengeance for him. The ancient fear of someone knowing your name was real, because your name represented something of your "real" self.

And this happens in religion too – people are always changing their names in scripture. And they are being given new names, like Simon being Cephas, or "rock," or Peter, as it's more commonly used in the English. He gets a new name. Same with Saul, who would go on to write a lot of the New Testament as Paul. These folks get new names to signify the new realities that they inhabit. It's the same in other Abrahamic religions, as we can see here. The injunction from a hadith to "have good names," or a lesson from the Talmud about the value of names.

The central claim here is that religion was experienced by them as not something you did one day a week, but as something that informed their entire lives. Faith, far from being a hobby, was something that shaped their lives inside and out. So much so that once they became in tune with the divine life, their lives had to shift. They could not be the same person they were before this big change that happened in their life – they were a new creation, they were a new person. Their departure from the old was so complete that they were willing to go through that whole awkward phase where you try to figure out who you're going to let be grandfathered in from your friends. The question I want the answer to is, "who got to keep calling Paul, Saul?" Would he get upset if you used the wrong name?

And so these moments when people are given a new name, or they adopt a new identity, they are holy moments that aren't done lightly. And we have some experience with that here in this church. Because we changed our name, did we not? To better represent what we wanted to the world? That was a big moment of discernment for this church, and it was a big deal. It was a holy moment, because these are moments in which we are actively constructing our own lives – we are joining with the divine to do something new, or old, or something more in keeping with our values. What is holy is in the becoming who we want to be and who we are called to be. Such a thing is always holy.

Of course, some people have more luck when changing their name than others do, don't they? This week I read of a judge that wrote a rather lengthy opinion about why courts can't use the preferred pronouns or names of litigants, calling the rules of pronouns complex and too difficult to understand, and refusing to use a preferred name for a transgender defendant. It seems to me that when I wanted people to refer to me as Michael, I did not have to fight too hard. Sure, some folks made the switch easier, and others didn't have to make the switch because I let them call me Casey, but no one refused to abide by my wishes or argued that they should be grandfathered in. I don't know what it's like to have my identity denied in the way that transgender and nonbinary folks do. I don't know what it's like to utter the sentence in a request that this defendant did: "I am a woman—can I not be referred to as one?"

That's the facts. But when I see how hard people have to fight to have their preferred name and pronouns used, I think it is clear to me that this not simply an issue of abiding by someone's wishes, it's about refusing to permit dehumanizing behavior. Names have power, and some people show their cruelty and power by refusing to them.

I said that when someone changes their name it's a holy thing. That it could represent affirming a true identity, reaching back, or it could be a big shift and go forward, or be any combination of the two. What I say from this pulpit is that for our trans and nonbinary siblings, a shift in names and pronouns is a holy thing – it is a beloved thing – it is a powerful thing.

There is power in a name, but names are inexorably bound up with identity, and with claiming holiness and feeling the breath of the Divine on our lives. I am convinced that is why God has so many names – different claimings for different people at different times, different anchors for our human selves to grasp at but never hold the soft hum at the center of all things. So, whoever you are, whatever your name is, welcome to this place – I'm sure we can find some name for the Divine that speaks to you here. It might take some looking, but it's sure to be here somewhere.

Blessed Be.