

Everybody Has a Name – John 1:29-42

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Bob Shepherd was the public address announcer at Yankee Stadium in New York for over fifty years before he died in 2010. Reggie Jackson, who starred for the Yankees in the 1970s, once referred to Shepherd as the “Voice of God.” If you were a Yankees fan (or New York Giants football fan – he was the stadium announcer for them as well), you’d remember his voice as part of the experience of being at Yankee Stadium. It was regal and majestic.

Shepherd’s job, of course, was to introduce the players – Yankees and visiting team players – as they came to the plate. And that required a detailed knowledge of how to pronounce the players’ names correctly. And this took a good deal of preparation.

In an interview before he died, he was asked what his then-favorite names to pronounce were.

“There’s one at the present time that I love to have my tongue work around. Shigetoshi Hasegawa. And I love the Hispanic names because they’re so euphonious. Alfonso Soriano. Those names are so much more euphonious than Anglo-Saxon names like Steve Sax. What can you do with Steve Sax?”

Shepherd went on to say that he’d often go to a player and ask him directly how to pronounce his name. He wanted to get it right. “It’s very important to me because teaching speech (he was a high school teacher as well), I tell them early in the course, knowing the name of the student and pronouncing it properly is a tribute to the student.”

Indeed. I often think of the person who is charged with reading all the graduates’ names at a commencement ceremony. Especially at a school or college where there are hundreds or thousands of names to read, it’s important on a day that is so special to each graduate to pronounce each name correctly.

No matter how simple or complex our names are, there is no disputing that each of us was given or assumed a name with a purpose behind it. Every parent carefully thinks of what to name their children. And every woman takes time to envision what her new name will become if she plans on assuming the last name of the man she's marrying.

Our own individual names suggest that we are individually valued by God. Last week, as we remembered our baptisms, we remembered how it is that each of us is preciousy marked with God's love and grace. And this morning, we're reminded that our unique names also indicate a unique purpose for each of us.

What stands out to me this morning about this passage from John 1 is all the names that are contained in it. First, John the Baptist declares Jesus as the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Later on, two of the disciples describe Jesus as "rabbi" and Messiah. Those two disciples were named in the passage as well: Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and Simon son of John, whom Jesus says will be called Cephas (which is translated Peter).

Why does Jesus take time to call out these guys by name? Why is it so important to the passage today that John, the author of the gospel, put in his gospel the fact that Jesus takes time to rename Simon as Cephas?

We don't know why. We don't know why he renamed him in the first place and why he chose the name Cephas. But Jesus' actions here, along with all the other names in the passage, remind us that these were not anonymous characters who were in the middle of a gospel story. They were real people with real names who, as it turned out, were invited by Jesus to "come and see" where he was staying and to spend the day with him.

Each of them was unique, each of them had talents, gifts, quirks, and tendencies. Jesus knows this and he reminds them and all of us of just how special each of us is in the kingdom of God.

And with that very personal connection he had to them, he also invites them into his life.

“Where are you staying?” they ask as they are following him. “Come and see,” he says.

That invitation was a common one on Jesus’ part. His life is a series of invitations to come and see—what’s he doing, what he’s teaching, what he’s preaching, and to participate in his work at the same time.

Jesus’ words and actions in this passage transcend the generations. They have meaning today. They remind each of us that we, too, have a name and an identity and a purpose. And they matter to him.

This morning, we’re ordaining and installing five new elders into leadership in our church: Beth Honey, Kathy Emmerson, Jeff Thode, Gayle Williams, and Bill Nelson. Those are their names, given to them by their parents or taken at a time of marriage. They partially reflect their unique identities.

With those names, of course, come unique personalities—ones filled with likes, dislikes, talents, and skills. And they are ones that Jesus knows very well and loves uniquely and passionately. And so we call them by name today when we set them apart for service, because they are reflective of how God calls us each uniquely for something special—to both be and do in this world.

And just as Jesus calls all of us to come and see what he is all about, so will Jesus be calling Beth, Kathy, Jeff, Gayle, and Bill to come and see what he’s calling them to do and to be as leaders.

The invitation Jesus makes to them he also makes to us. Come and see, Jesus says, when the disciples inquire as to where he’s staying on this particular day.

It’s also an invitation for us to discover what it is that Christ is calling us to do with the lives we’ve been given.

As we grow from childhood into young adulthood and then into senior adulthood, there are many different roles we play throughout our different life stages. And there can also be many different jobs or tasks to fulfill as Christ’s disciples.

No matter what stage of life, those tasks don't end. They may change, but they don't end.

Last week, I mentioned that the life expectancy in our country has dipped a bit in recent years—to 76.4 years of age. In 2020, it was 78.8. Still though, that means that from the time that most of us retire, we will have nearly two decades on average to enjoy retirement.

What does enjoying retirement mean? We can amuse ourselves in retirement. That can be done through recreation and leisure. But we can amuse ourselves by using skills we've always had or are just discovering in order to make the lives of others better—to effectively love our neighbors.

For some of us, we're motivated by wanting a credible legacy. As Patricia Tull writes in a recent piece for the Presbyterian Outlook about each of us finding a faithful third act in retirement, "What if we nurture our kids, work hard, vote regularly, go to church, tidy our campsites, eat our vegetables and do everything we were taught but we don't give our grandkids a livable future with stories they will be proud to tell us?"

In other words, there is always work to be done for the kingdom, whether it's pre-retirement or post-retirement. Some of us reach retirement age and think to ourselves, "Well, it's time for the younger generation to take on all these tasks in the church and in the community. I've done my time."

But the call of Jesus to follow—to "come and see"—has no expiration date. The work of the kingdom is ours to do in some form no matter our age. As we each have a name, we each have a unique path to where God wants us to go.

Tomorrow is a national holiday, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. And as I ponder the people who are so faithful in following Jesus' directive to "come and see" what Christ has in store for us, I think of this man—uniquely named and uniquely gifted—who was always, always, in a non-violent way pushing for greater justice in

the world. And he did this every day of his life. Until the moment he died, he sought to fulfill the task Christ had set before him.

Jesus knew his name, of course, and he knows our names. And he sets before us jobs to do—no matter our age.

“Come,” he beckons. “Come and see the future I have for you.”