

“Child of God”
Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38
Lent 2 B
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Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

In one of the most intimate moments in your Christian life God gives you a new name and sends you off in a new direction, marked forever with the cross of Christ. There is even a blank line in the Baptism service for your given name, followed immediately by your new name. “Charles Edward, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ for ever.” “Sarah Jane, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” There you have been given a name or two by your parents and the new name by which you shall be known as a Christian, “Child of God.”

Naming is a very powerful act. Naming stakes something of a claim over your life. From then on your life is constrained and marked with that name. The good news is that God has given you a new name. And just wait until you see where that new name will take you. You have no idea.

My parents had a deal when I was born. If it was a girl, my mother would give the first name and my father the middle name. And if it was a boy, my father would name the first name and my mother the second. That was how I ended up with “John Robert.” They said they liked the name because it was hard to nickname. They wanted the names they had chosen to stick. All I had to do was dodge the diminutive “Johnny,” which I was only too happy to do.

Just about the time I was about to go off to college, my mother has a conversation with me, just the two of us. My mother said, “When you go to college, John, you have an opportunity to change your identity by being known by a new name.” I didn’t see what she was getting at.

“Do you mean I could be known as ‘J. R. Pederson’ instead of ‘John?’” There was some precedent for that in my family. My father, Ingert, a very difficult name to remember and spell, was often known as “I. J.” (And when he moved in to Sunrise at the bottom of the hill here in Denver and he was asked by the Executive Director how he wanted to be named, he replied after some thought with a definite message. “I want to be known by my given name, Ingert.” That is who he was and everybody else was just going to have to get used to it. Names are powerful.)

“Yeah, something like that,” she said. “I kind of like the sound of “J. Robert Pederson.” Now I got it. She was trying to rename me. And in so doing her middle name would rise to visible prominence, demoting my father’s name to an initial. It was a sneaky way of exercising a little more power. I admired her for it, but kept my name as I had. Naming is a powerful thing, and not to be taken lightly. Is it, child of God?

For a short period of time in middle school my son took to a misspelling of his name on school records, etc. I didn't like it a bit. Finally after having seen the misspelling too many times I announced to him, "I named you, and it is not your prerogative to name yourself." Your relationship with God is something like that, child of God.

Throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament God seems to have made something of a vocation out of re-naming folks. Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul, and in this text Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. The practice is retained in the renaming of popes and kings.¹

Naming is the prerogative of the one who has some power and influence over you. It is a prerogative of parenthood to name. Unless you go to some effort, you are stuck with the name given you. When God comes into a person's life you lose your old name. In this naming, there is a calling into being of a whole new stage of life, now of life that is constrained by God. Being named by God we become somehow God's from now on. What do you think that may mean for you, "child of God?"

It happened to Jesus. From his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus' life is now under the constraint of God's will. His life is not accidental and it is not his own. This new ownership is, for Jesus, the taking up of a cross that ends with the dying of something and the bearing of something.

"Lois Esther, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."
"Robert Charles, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

This is a curious phrase, being marked by the cross forever. It means that from this baptism on, you will take up Jesus' cross.

Taking up one's cross is not a euphemism for bearing with whatever burdens life may have handed to us. It is not a prediction of sacrifice *per se*, sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. It is not a call to sheer denial of self. Nor is it a warning of martyrdom to come, though it may come to that. It is certainly not an ethical urging.

To take up one's cross is more like orienting one's life according to one's new name, devoting one's life for the gospel.

Some say that it is here in the gospel of Mark for the purpose of speaking to a church that has become overconfident.² An overconfident church may not have any idea of what following Jesus will mean or entail. Instead, they doze off, too sure that they have this discipleship thing in their pocket. In the gospel of Mark Jesus' repeatedly urges them to "keep awake." They had forgotten their name. So what could it mean that we, along with Peter and a church overconfident in its discipleship needs correction in its direction, strategy, mission?

¹ Evertt Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 70.

² Donald H. Juel, *Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 141.

We have been in a mission discerning process now for a number of months. Members of our congregation have attended workshops in which much data has been collected, analysis made, and effort expended to figure out what God is up to in our neighborhood for us to discover.

At various points in mission planning I have caught myself believing that mission planning is figuring out what we as a congregation can do well, and then offering it to the world. Then we would work on that strength. And when we get the act right, we would throw the doors open and invite them to come in. And if it worked, then everyone would be blest by knowing us. It is still a little hazy what we would be inviting them to, but we'll worry about that later. See, this discipleship thing is as easy as baking the right pie that everyone wants, and they will all come for dinner.

But it is difficult to bless from that “one up” position. Strengths offered to the world subtly suggest dominance and invites others to be submissive. The blessing of power always whiffs of control. And if control is what church is about, you may have forgotten your name, child of God.

This was Peter’s kind of church, inspirational, authoritative, sure of itself. This was the church preferred by the sons of Zebedee, who already were staking out positions of power and authority. They have no idea what it will be like serving with Jesus.³ “Taking up one’s cross” urges to a considerably lower, even scandalous status. Power cannot bless.

Instead, Jesus famously points out, it is the poor, the meek, the mourning, and children who are in a particularly good position to bless. They cannot control. They cannot coerce. They cannot dominate. All they can do is bless. And you are named one of those “children,” aren’t you, child of God.

Jerome Berryman writes of the Anglican parish of St. Elizabeth’s. Every time they went to the community to bless they were misunderstood and mistrusted. It finally occurred to the vicar “the importance of thinking of the church as a powerless child rather than as a powerful parent.”⁴

When the parish built a new building in 1991, there was terrible vandalism for the first five years. While in conversation with a girl who had been throwing rocks at the previous vicar’s house he discovered something about the position of the church from a child’s perspective. The church gradually came to see itself as having something very much in common with that misbehaving girl.

The power of the church is not that of a parent – greater resources, more experience, greater physical strength; instead the church’s power is that of the child – stubbornness and doggedness, and the tendency to ask awkward and embarrassing questions. So when the church comes to sit down. . . with the

³ Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), p. 130.

⁴ Jerome W. Berryman, “Children and Mature Spirituality.” available at [www.godlyplay.org/uploads/pages/downloads/Children__Mature_Spirituality .pdf](http://www.godlyplay.org/uploads/pages/downloads/Children__Mature_Spirituality.pdf)

community, the church sits down as a child, still learning, potentially disruptive, rather than as a parent, saying “come to where we already are.”⁵

Surely, as a congregation we are still learning. I know we are “potentially disruptive.” We are amazed and perplexed at the world, “asking awkward and embarrassing questions.” Children of God, that may be who we are called to be.

The power of the church rests not in its strong programs, its reputation for dignified worship or secret wisdom, or its high status in the community. The power of the church is far more subversive than that. It is the power of the child. If a congregation is to invite people to God, then children are at the very center of what it takes for a church’s mission to be accomplished. Cultivating a child-like congregation sounds weak and powerless, but it is the kind of weakness that is very strong. Cultivating a child-like congregation may be something God is up to here.

You have a new name, “Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”

“If any want to become my followers, take them deny themselves and up their cross and follow me. For those who save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

In one of the most intimate moments in your Christian life God gives you a new name and sends you off in a new direction, marked forever with the cross of Christ. Remember your name, child of God. Remember that you have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. Amen.

⁵ H. Wells, *In an Urban Estate* quoted in Berryman. p. 26.