

CHOOSING A NAME¹
Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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It is said that Mark Twain was the source of this familiar statement:

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

With all the extraordinary changes over the decades, it is striking that the search for wisdom remains the same. We are flooded with facts. We have a torrent of knowledge. But we seem to have only a trickle of wisdom. We are all searching for it, and church is one of those places we hope to find it.

I

Tradition says that Solomon was wise, so wise in fact that he wrote three biblical books about wisdom. The first is the Song of Solomon, which the ancient rabbis concluded was written when Solomon was young, when the testosterone was flowing freely. The second was the book of Proverbs, which the rabbis concluded was written when Solomon was a middle-aged man. The third is the book of Ecclesiastes, which the rabbis concluded was written when Solomon was old and disillusioned.

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Proverbs is part of what is called the “wisdom literature” of the Bible, which seeks to teach us readers about how to live well. This wisdom is not based on revelation, but is handed down from generation to generation and is grounded on a right relationship with God: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*² The proverbs, in other words, are guides for ordinary people in ordinary life experiences. Since that description encompasses most of us, it is worth taking a look at these proverbs.

But one word of warning: the book of Proverbs is not a continuous story like some of the other books of the Bible. Each proverb stands on its own and does not build on the one before it. They are best pondered one by one. So you don’t rush through the book of Proverbs. You let each one sink in. That is the reason we read them slowly today with a musical break between each one.

II

We focus today on that familiar proverb that speaks of a good name: *A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.* We all have a name, but what choice did we have? We are saddled with our names when we are born, and those names may be good or not depending on what our parents did before us, or in some cases what our ancestors did many generations before us. Yet the proverb implies that a good name is indeed

² Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33.

something we can choose. For the short span of our lifetime we have the choice to make good the name we have been given!

Somewhere I read about a little town in California where a lot of ex-hippies settled down into suburban middle-class lives. The only clue to their former lives were the names of their children: names like Blossom, Moonbeam, Starlight, and such. On the first day of school, the first grade teacher greeted each child and called them by the names their parents had written on the little card hanging around their necks. One child was named "Fruit Orchard," which struck the teacher as a little way out, but she was used to it. She noticed, however, that the little girl was unresponsive when her name was called.

At the end of the day, the teachers helped the children find the correct school bus for their stop. Parents had been told to write on the back of the name tag where the school bus was to let their child off. The teacher turned over Fruit Orchard's tag and it read "Elizabeth."

III

In the Bible, naming something is given great weight. In the story of Adam and Eve, "Adam" means "humankind," and "Eve" means "living." Then Adam is given the power of naming the rest of the creatures God creates. The story says, *So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them;*

and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. That, my friends, is power!

The truth is that whoever succeeds in giving a name to just about anything has great power. Think of all the effort currently being expended in the national health care debate regarding what to name it. One side will name it Justice, Compassion, the Common Good; the other side will name it Socialism and Evil. The side that succeeds in naming something is usually the side that wins the debate.

That is the reason corporations spend enormous sums of money for naming rights. We can assume that the Digital Federal Credit Union paid big bucks to name the downtown Convention Center the DCU Center. The Celtics no longer play in the Boston Garden; it is the TD Banknorth Garden. A 30-second commercial in the most recent Superbowl cost \$3 million!--all to get your product's name before the most people.

IV

Now a serious question: what does the name of First Baptist Church of Worcester mean? What is the worth of that name? When people hear the name, First Baptist Church, does it elicit thoughts of integrity, genuineness, wisdom, community involvement, freedom and respect, inclusivity, a world vision? How much are we willing to invest to make sure our name has integrity?

And on a personal level, when someone hears your name, do they think of values such as dependability, faith, honesty, courage, hope, integrity? Such a name, declares this proverb, is rather to be chosen than great riches. It is a choice we can make.

There is a wonderful story from the New Testament about Peter and John encountering a man lame from birth. He was asking for a handout, and Peter said, *Look at us*. Then he said, *I have no silver and gold, but what I have I give to you*. At that point the man perhaps thought Peter was going to give him a piece of bread, or perhaps his robe. But here is what Peter gave him: he said, *In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk*. We might say, "I have no fortune in treasury bills, but I have something even more important and even more powerful. I have a name. It is a name full of integrity and wisdom, a name under which a whole community of people have gathered who will receive you, support you, love you, and learn from you."

That is how important a name was to them! Everything was done in the name of Jesus, which means that everything was done in the same humble and faithful spirit of Jesus. They prayed in his name; they preached in his name; they cared for others in his name; they even greeted one another in his name. They died with his name on their lips. Why?--Because they recognized a transformative love that makes a difference in people's lives, in the life of their

communities, in the life of their world. They recognized that the name of Jesus could transform an entrenched Roman empire.

This church has a mission statement: “We are a community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and understanding as we seek to live the Way of Christ.” To live the Way of Christ is to choose a name—the name of Christ. To live the Way of Christ is to be constantly reminded that you bear a name of integrity and love. You bear the name of one who cared for the sick of heart, the sick of mind, the sick of soul. A Christian bears a name of integrity, and we do not want to tarnish that name.

V

Shakespeare’s Falstaff said, “He who steals my good name, steals all that I have.” The church functions in the world, sometimes with and sometimes without, a great deal of tangible resources. It is true that this congregation has a wonderful building; we have a wonderful location; we also have generous people who truly care about this church. But the most valuable thing we have is our name.

We bear a name, the name of Christ, a name we want to live up to. In spite of all the ways that name has been betrayed over the centuries, it is a good name, a name we can be proud of, a name we can all try to live up to as we live the Way of Christ. It is rather to be chosen than great riches!