

Church of the Holy Apostles (Episcopal-Roman Catholic), Virginia Beach, Virginia  
The Feast of the Holy Name/Mary the Mother of God (RCL)  
January 1, 2012  
The Rev. Michael B. Ferguson, Episcopal Co-pastor  
Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

You may have noticed when you received your bulletin this morning that there are two names listed on the front: Holy Name and Mary, the Mother of God. A word of explanation may help. The Episcopal liturgical calendar designates this day as the Feast of the Holy Name, while the Roman Catholic calendar designates it as the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. What makes that dual designation more interesting is that both lectionaries use the same lessons, the ones you just heard.

So, if this were a “Catholic Sunday” (I trust visitors will figure out what this means shortly) you’d probably hear a homily that focused on the special relationship of Mary, both to God and to her human-yet-divine son, Jesus. Since this is an “Episcopal Sunday” the focus will be more on Jesus’ naming, in accordance with Jewish law, the importance of his name to 2012 years of Christianity, how our names relate to his, and more importantly, the significance of our names to our Christian ministry.

So, one Sunday, two traditions, and two apparently different themes. That leads to a quotation I find helpful: “What’s in a name?” Do you recognize the source? Maybe this will help: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” You probably don’t have to be a Shakespeare scholar to recognize those as words that flow from lips of Juliet Capulet in the second act of *Romeo and Juliet*. In that speech, Juliet laments the fact that her family and that of Romeo Montague are mortal enemies and that the love they have discovered for one another is doomed. Juliet loves Romeo, not his name, and vice versa.

I believe that applies to our situation today. It doesn't matter if Episcopalians call this Holy Name and Catholics call it the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God. What's important, biblically, theologically, and liturgically, is that the Church in its wisdom has found a way to honor the traditions of our Jewish ancestors by setting aside a day to witness to the importance of giving God's Son, divine yet human, a human name. Names meant a great deal to our ancestors, much more than they tend to do today.

As an example, the blessing heard in the first lesson, from one of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, repeats the English version of God's name three times. Our Jewish ancestors would not have used the term "God" or "Lord," because God's name could not be repeated by Jews, but they would have known that God was blessing their ancestors, beginning at the outset of their desert sojourn.

Reduced to its English equivalents, Jesus' name means "God saves." It highlights the message that Jesus brought into the consciousness of his fellow Jews: "The Lord is salvation." By the time God sent Jesus into this world to rescue the Chosen People from their worldliness, keeping the rules and works of the Jewish Law had become more important and more universally observed than was trusting in God's love and faithfulness. Countless ill-advised political arrangements had been undertaken and some segments of the Jewish population collaborated with their Roman occupiers.

So, an important part of Jesus' ministry, in keeping with the name that God's messenger Gabriel spoke to Mary in the midst of their momentous encounter, was to remind the Jewish people, and especially their leaders, that they had a special relationship with God and a special mission. They were God's Chosen People, set apart when God sent Moses to lead them from captivity and slavery in Egypt. They

were called to lead lives centered on God's law, as opposed to the ways followed by their pagan neighbors. Although it wouldn't become clear until after Jesus' cruel crucifixion and glorious resurrection, God had another mission for them as well; they would be the ones who would carry the message of God's love to all people.

What's in your name? More importantly, what's in our name? When we are baptized the church and community ratify and bless the name our human parents selected for us. Whether it's Mike, Carolyn, Jim, Mary, John, Anne, or some other name, our parents decided that's what we would be called, how we would be known.

But there's a more important name that we receive when we are baptized, in parallel to Jesus' naming at his circumcision eight days after his birth. When we are baptized, whether it occurs within hours or days of our birth, or many years later, the name we receive is: "Christ's ones." Christians. We become sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, by virtue of being adopted into his family. When we are adopted, we are given the right to call God, "Abba! Father!" as Jesus did, and as the letter to the Galatians reminds us. Saying, "Abba! Father!" doesn't mean we are presumptuous, but rather is an acknowledgment of our need for God's sheltering mercy. .

Our adoption as Jesus' siblings and receiving his name brings both special benefits and special responsibilities. The principal benefit we receive by becoming one of Christ's ones, is the assurance that salvation is ours. At the outset, we don't have to do anything to justify God giving us this special gift. God's unconditional love is that: unconditional. To be sure, we can stray from the path that God wants us to follow, and we can fall into a state of sin that separates us from God's love. But God gives us a

way out of the traps we set for ourselves. It's called repenting; turning back to God, following the path that God sets for us, and following where Jesus leads.

The special responsibilities that we have by virtue of receiving the name "Christ's ones" include following in Jesus' steps by serving those whom he favored: the "least and the lost." Luke's Gospel, the source of this morning's vignette from Jesus' earliest days, frequently reminds us of that concept. In fact, even before Jesus' birth, Mary sang her special song, which we know as *The Magnificat*, in which she acknowledges that God lifts up the lowly and "strikes down the mighty from their thrones." God sets the "lifting up" and "striking down" ministries before Christ's Ones for action.

In keeping with that idea, many scholars believe that God's choice of the shepherds to receive the angelic messenger that a special child had been born in Bethlehem was intentional. God's choice signals that God favors those most in need rather than kings and princes living in comfortable palaces, or cruel dictators living behind barricades, or corporate executives in multi-million dollar homes behind gates.

In today's terms, the principal recipients of that message might be single parents who are out of work because of corporate greed, living in their cars with two or three children. Or immigrant laborers forced to work "off the clock." Or military families forced to take food stamps because of the lack of a living wage. What, how, and why we name those in need doesn't matter. What does matter is the way in which we respond to their needs. As Jesus' siblings, set aside at our naming, we are called to be as Christ-like as we can. When "the least and the lost" look at us and our community, will they see Christ? Will they see us live up to, and into, the special name we have been given: "Christ's ones"? Will they feel welcome here, and want to join us in serving others?