

Sermon for Matins on August 22, 2007
2007 General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity

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Readings: 2 Samuel 9:1-13; Acts 19: 1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Names matter. Anyone sitting here this morning who is giving thanks he wasn't named "Mephibosheth" is convinced of that. Probably many here can tell the story of your name: who you were named for, how your name was chosen, or why you are called by your name. You may even feel that if you had been given a different name, somehow you would be different, too. Yes, names matter.

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul undergoes a change in his name during the course of the book of Acts. The young man Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, has his fateful encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, which leads to another fateful encounter with Ananias, and Saul's own baptism in the name of Jesus. Saul is a changed man, but his name only changes as he travels on his first missionary journey into the lands of the Greek speaking Gentiles and Jews. Saul of the tribe of Benjamin – and what memories are stirred by that name – becomes Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles. This is a man who has encountered the power of names firsthand: the name of Jesus, which comes as the shocking answer to his startled question, "Who are you, lord?"

It is no minor liturgical nicety, this business of the name that is spoken in baptism. In this rather odd story at the beginning of chapter 19 in Acts, Paul encounters a group of disciples who don't know anything about the Holy Spirit, and this ignorance is explained when Paul learns that they were baptized into John's baptism, and not in the name of the Lord Jesus. John's baptism was good enough at one time, but it can't bring about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Only baptism into the name of Jesus can do that. That point is made when, after being baptized into the name of Jesus, and receiving the laying on of hands from Paul, the group displays the classic signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit: they speak in tongues and prophecy.

This hits right at an issue that keeps coming up in the church, over and over again down through the centuries: the connection between the Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus Christ. What the witness of the New Testament seems to be is that the Spirit comes in order to bear witness to the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Spirit brings one to faith in the only Son of the Father, Jesus who has been raised from the dead with power, and who now conveys that power to those who are found in him. Baptism is the entry point for being "in Jesus Christ," that is, being baptized in his name. To argue whether being baptized in the name of Jesus is different than being baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity is to misunderstand what the name of Jesus means in these passages. Certainly Paul understood that baptism in the name of Jesus was baptism in the name of the Son of God, who was crucified in the flesh and raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so that the Spirit of Christ might dwell in us. That is the Jesus that Paul preached about.

And so, one is baptized in the name of Jesus because that is the only way that one can receive the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that Paul writes about in his letters is no "free agent," answerable to nothing and no-one, bringing new revelation that is unrelated to the Father who is seen through the Son. Instead, the Spirit bears witness to the Son, and to the healing power of the resurrection as prefigured in baptism. In Acts that power is manifested in the gifts of speaking in tongues, in prophecy, and in healing. When the name of Jesus is invoked, things happen.

To confess that the Holy Spirit brings one to faith in this Jesus, crucified and risen from the grave, the only Son of the Father, and frees us from the power of sin in the waters of baptism, is to make the only identification that one can faithfully confess about the Spirit within the Christian Church.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when faithfully confessing what the Church has always understood about any number of matters, including the Holy Spirit, strikes many as being hopelessly paternalistic, exclusivist, and irrelevant. We have itching ears, both within and without the Church. We love to receive what is new, particularly that special revelation and knowledge that has been saved until this time for our ears to hear. The Holy Spirit is transformed into a spirit of license and freedom, free to reinterpret, indeed to reinvent the faith of the Church as the Church has been enlightened to reject the errors of old.

Paul's question in Acts 19 is the question we need to hear: Into *what* then were you baptized? To be baptized into any other name than that of Jesus, the Jesus of the Scriptures, the only Son of the Father as revealed by the Spirit, means that one receives not the Holy Spirit attested to in Scripture and Confessions, but a different, alien spirit. This alien spirit bears witness not to Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, but instead witnesses to the cult of individual rights and privileges, in which being accepted as one truly is replaces the drowning of the sinful self in the waters of baptism. Instead of being buried with Christ into his death so that we might be raised in his likeness, clothed in his righteousness, this alien spirit reassures us that what we are is what God intended us to be. True worship consists in recognizing the goodness of the self that is already inside each of us. Instead of drowning the Old Adam through daily contrition and repentance that kills all sins and evil desires, we celebrate! We celebrate the self that we find when we turn inward upon ourselves to discover who we really are. Denial of one's self with its passions and desires is not only unnecessary, that denial is evil.

At the same time, we flee from any sign of physical aging and decay. As a culture we seek the fountain of youth in the form of potions, pills, and surgical procedures that promise us eternal life. These artifices preserve the illusion that our outer nature is being renewed day by day, while it is only too evident that our inner natures are wasting away. Sadly, this is seen even in the church herself by our willingness to discard that life which is too unformed, deformed, or ill-formed to be considered either preserving or worth fighting for. The spirit of this age, a spirit which appears to be perfectly free and un-tethered to any moral code or being which would confine and restrict our human impulses, lures us with its siren song of self-actualization until, too late, we recognize it for what it really is: the spirit of the arch-deceiver, the father of lies who leads us on to despair and destruction. It is, in fact, the spirit of Antichrist.

In stark contrast, the Holy Spirit that bears witness to Jesus does not just reveal the resurrected Christ of glory and power. He confronts us, first and foremost, with the crucified Jesus, the Jesus who underwent humiliation, betrayal, suffering, and death on the cross for the sins of the world. To

be baptized in the name of Jesus is to be baptized into his death, as Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome. Baptism bestows on us a peculiar power indeed: the power to see in the cross the glory of God, the power to see the world turned upside down in terms of what it means to win and to lose. To receive baptism in the name of Jesus is to be baptized under the sign of that cross. Receive the sign of the Holy Cross, both upon your forehead and upon your heart, to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. To be a Child of God through baptism is indeed to be marked by the cross of Jesus Christ and to be sealed by the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the presence of God in that most God-forsaken of scenes.

If the culture has sought a spirituality disconnected from the restraints of religion, then in the Church herself too many have sought a spirit unburdened by the very human flesh and blood of the Jew from Nazareth, whose messy death is an embarrassing reminder of our own inability to escape our own death.

But the Holy Spirit will have none of that. Attempts to claim the Spirit apart from his witness to Christ are certain to end in ultimate failure. Names do matter. The Holy Spirit is made known by the name he reveals to us, the name which he daily breathes into our hearts and minds, the name which is above every other name, the name into which we are baptized. It is that name to which every knee will bend, as we and all creatures finally recognize the King of Glory in the marks of slaughter that he still bears. His name is Jesus, as the Holy Spirit has called us to faith in him, the one who comes to save his people from all their sins.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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