

The Third Church Pulpit
Sermons from Third Presbyterian Church
Rochester, New York

“A Family Story”

John Wilkinson

December 2, 2018



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First Sunday of Advent

I Thessalonians 3:9–13 and Jeremiah 33:14–16

“What’s in a name,” Shakespeare famously asked. My grandfather, my father’s father, was named Parker Wilkinson, and though he never used the suffix, was likely Parker Wilkinson V, the fifth. When my father was born, my grandparents had a choice to make. Later, my grandfather said that he never really liked his name, and so my father was named Kenneth John Wilkinson. John may or may not have been a family name; Kenneth certainly wasn’t. But no Parker Wilkinson VI, the sixth, for my dad, and so when I came around, certainly no Parker Wilkinson VII, the seventh, which would have been a big name to bear. It might have been kind of cool to be called that; then again, maybe not!

When I did come around, my parents were therefore faced with that same choice—what to call the baby. Their imagination was either very deep or not at all, because I was named Kenneth John Wilkinson, Jr. I was always John, from the moment I was born. I had an aunt who wanted to call me John–John, after JFK, Jr., who was a toddler when I was born. I’m forever glad that did not happen!!

I have not given my name much thought, one way or the other. Since I have always been “John,” I think even less about it in its many syllable fullness. If someone calls the house and asks for Kenneth, I know it’s a sales call and I simply say he’s not home. Post September 11, airplane tickets became a little trickier. And because we named our son Kenneth, without all the middle name and suffix drama, we for a while had three Kenneth Wilkinsons in the Presbyterian Board of Pensions system.

If you were standing here instead of me, what would you tell us about your name? Or if you were looking yourself in the mirror, how would you reflect upon your

name. I have discussed this with many of you when you've named a child, or when you've told me about the birth of a grandchild. Some names have long provenances; others were picked out of a book. When we lived in Chicago, there was a boom of babies being named Jordan, after number 23. Not a bad choice, or Ryne, for another famous number 23, Ryne Sandberg.

Our names are not who we are, of course, but they matter. They are windows and symbols. Jim Croce famously sang "Like the pine trees lining the winding road/I got a name, I got a name/Like the singing bird and the croaking toad/I got a name, I got a name/And I carry it with me like my daddy did/But I'm living the dream that he kept hid."

Names matter, and what they represent. Just look at the rise of things like ancestry.com and 23andme. Again, names aren't who we are, not our DNA, not our personality, not our soul, but they matter. Whether we wear a physical one or not, all the time we walk around as if we have a "Hello, my name is _____" name tag on, and we've even asked you to invest in fancy name tags here so we can get to know each other a bit more.

"I have called you my name," God says in the book of the prophet Isaiah; "you are mine."

In our Year of Stories, I am very much intrigued by the ways our individual stories, represented by our names, are interwoven into a common story, a family story. I use that term, "family," advisably. It can cut both ways in the life of a church. It can mean welcome and hospitality and relationship and connectedness. But it can also mean insider and insular and overly familiar. We are not the Waltons, but we are not the Sopranos, either. Maybe the Simpsons!

Nonetheless, I still use family because it can be a powerfully suggestive metaphor of how God draws us in, from diverse stories, places and experiences, draws us together, individuals, with individual names representing individual stories, and creates something new, and then sends us out to serve. Sometimes the church, when it is at its hospitable, open best, is the only place where your full story, where the deep truth of your name, can be welcomed.

We bring our stories, our experiences. They are transformed at our baptisms, and as God weaves our story together into a common story, with a fabric stronger than any collection of individuals ever could be.

At the outset of Advent, I have been thinking about names. Our names, yours and mine. The names of those we remember, those no longer with us. The names of those yet to come. George Herbert Walker Bush, whose life and service we remember with gratitude and whose death we mourn. He had a name, as did Barbara, as did their daughter Robin, and they are part of the family.

Or all the names on the AIDS quilt, including my cousin David's, all those lost to HIV-AIDS and those living with it. They have names, all of them, and they are part of the family.

There are other names in the story – John the Baptist, about whom we will hear in the next few weeks. Joseph. The magi, whose names are assigned from beyond the Bible. Unnamed shepherds and followers, Mary, of course, whose name and witness continues to resonate. They are part of the story.

And there is that name, of course, the name above every name. “O blest Is Christ who came,” we have sung, “in God’s most holy name.” We call him many things. Teacher. Prophet. Moral example. Son of God. Son of man. Later in Advent we will recall other names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. All are correct, yet even taken as a whole are incomplete.

We will experience him as a tiny, vulnerable baby and a righteous judge. He has a name, Jesus, and he is part of the family story, yet there are times when his narrative becomes the story itself, love and death, hope and discouragement, exclusion and embrace.

- When we light the candles of the Advent wreath.
- When we sing the Advent hymns in their minor keys.
- When we are bombarded by an ever heightened and encroaching consumerism.
- When the earth quakes in Alaska and fires burn in California and our geopolitics seems to fractures and fragile.
- When we look for little glimmers of peace and hope and joy and love.

Whatever we do in these coming weeks, remember your name, and know that it matters.

And remember the name, as we receive communion today, of the one in front of and behind you in line, or to your left and right as we share bed and cup. Those names matter as well.

And remember the names of those not here, whether on the other side of the globe or down the street, those lacking hope, those lacking food and clothing and shelter and educational opportunity.

Those names matter, and like yours and mine, are woven together by a God whose name, Jeremiah tells us, is righteousness, and who aspires for us the capacity to embrace our names, to love our true and full stories, and to write a new story, together.

And remember that name as well, Jesus, in all its heavenly glory and all its flesh-and-blood particularity, its divinity and its humanity. It matters. It is part of the story. It is the story. Amen.

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