

The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller
Year A, Holy Name of Jesus, Luke 2.15-21, 1 January 2017
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

What's in a name? In the summer of 2013, Linda and I took a trip to the United Kingdom to help Abbey celebrate the completion of her Master's degree. While we were there, she took us around London to see the sites and one stop included a walk through the Parliament Square Garden. There, to my great surprise, I discovered a statue of Jan Christiaan Smuts, former Prime Minister of South Africa who died in 1950. I stood in front of the statue and asked Linda to take my picture as someone walking by shouted out to ask if I were related to him. I'm not, but just before I was born, my father was reading a book about Smuts and decided to name me after him. As I grew older, I slowly learned to appreciate my name, but my childhood friends knew it only as a girl's name and they teased me without mercy—so much so that, when I was five year's old and we had just moved to a new home in Illinois, I told some neighbors they could just call me Jimmy.

What's in a name? Every Thursday morning, a small group of parishioners gathers in this church for what we call the Healing Eucharist. And while I hope that every Eucharist is a healing experience, in this service we offer the laying on hands and anointing with oil for healing. At the end of this, we pray, in part, that God would make us “know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And every week I'm struck by this prayer. First, I'm struck by the fact that the phrase “health and salvation” is somewhat redundant. We have tended to obscure the fact that the early church understood salvation to include well-being on earth, and not simply

the promise of eternal life in heaven as we typically—and, some would say, incorrectly—understand it today. Second, I'm struck by the prayer's emphasis on both "knowing and feeling." I'm an academic, and I get knowing. But feeling? Not so much. And yet, as I pray this prayer week after week, it is beginning to do its work on me, and I wonder if God might answer this prayer for me as well—that I could *feel* as well as *know* God's health and salvation, however redundant that phrase might be. I find myself longing for this, and wondering what difference it might make in my life. And last, I am always struck by the prayer's emphasis on our Lord's Name, with "Name" written with an uppercase first letter to signify its importance. Now, I understand the importance Christians give to *Jesus* himself—both his words and deeds—for our health and salvation, but why, I wonder, this emphasis on his *Name*? It seems almost like a talisman, a magical holdover from an earlier age intended to bring us something like "good luck." But is it just this? Or, is it something more profound? Am I missing something here?

What's in a name? Not surprisingly, it turns out that names matter. In the Jewish tradition, names are not given arbitrarily. They are intended to convey the nature and essence, as well as a sense of the history and reputation, of the thing named. When Moses asks God what God's "name" is, he is not asking "what should I call you;" instead, he is asking "who are you; what are you like; what have you done."¹ Actually, in the Bible, God seems to have many names, but they are now typically understood as properties or attributes of the one God. Regardless, in the Jewish tradition, the most important name of God is the one revealed to Moses. It is spelled with four Hebrew consonants, YHWH, and usually pronounced "Yahveh" or, in English, Yahweh or Jehovah, but no one knows for sure how it was originally pronounced or spelled—the Hebrew vowel points have been lost. This

name of God translates as “I am who I am” and, as such, it is usually viewed as a reference to God’s eternal existence (it is related to the verb, to be).

What’s in a name? Today, if we haven’t figured it out by now, we celebrate the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. If we were Jewish, we’d be celebrating his circumcision, carried out according to tradition eight days after his birth. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, Jesus’ name—in Hebrew, Yehoshua or, sometimes, Yeshua, and in English, Joshua—is itself related to the name of God revealed to Moses and means, “God is my salvation.” In Matthew, an angel tells Joseph and, in Luke, Mary, to name their son Jesus and, as such, his name signifies the purpose and destiny of his life: he will lead his people, like the first Joshua, out of the desert of their exile and, even more, he will save them from their sins. But Jesus does not only have a highly symbolic name; his name, like God’s, is also deemed to be “holy.” The notion of holiness seems very familiar to us but, if we stop and think about it, it may be hard to explain. It refers to how we designate or “set aside” objects, beliefs, or, in this case, names for religious purposes and, after these things have been set aside or made holy, to how they can evoke wonder, awe, or even fear. They evoke these feelings because these names have power—power not only to heal, but to destroy, and so worshippers want to be on the right side of this power.

What’s in a name? How might I have been a different person if I hadn’t needed to deal with teasing about my name as a child? My name taught me to what it was like to be treated as an outsider and eventually, as I got tougher, it taught me how not to regard others’ opinion of me so deeply. How might Jesus’ mission and destiny been different if his name had been, say, John or Isaac or

Jacob? I suspect it would have made a difference. Early Jewish Christians saw the name of Jesus as one very important clue that he was, indeed, the One for whom they were waiting, the Messiah.

What's in a name? Would, in fact, a rose smell just as sweet if it had another name? I suspect not. Names matter. For Christians, the name of Jesus rings down through the ages with holy power and healing love and, somehow, we've managed to hold those two together, both power and love, holiness and healing. Names matter. My prayer this morning for us all is that God would also make *us* "know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.

¹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/name.html>. YHWH is often used when discussing God's loving and merciful relationship with human beings. Out of respect for the fact that Jews usually don't pronounce or even write the name of God except in prayer or study, most English translations of the Bible follow Jewish custom and use the word, LORD, in four uppercase letters, to signify the four Hebrew consonants that stand for this name of God.