

What's in a Name?

a sermon
by Dan Griswold
Trinity Reformed Church
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John 8:31–36

Jeremiah 31:31–34

What's in a name?

For some of us, a whole lot. For others, not so much.

A name can mean identity, or signal the loss of identity.

The name given at birth may be a precious gift; it may be a painful burden.

The choice to change a name, say, at marriage, this can be

like stepping into a beautiful new day,
or a leap into a terrifying unknown,
or a concession to convention,
or an escape from abuse.

I'm intrigued by personal names in other cultures and languages.

For people from Latin America, very often they'll have two surnames, or "last names," one from the father and the other from the mother.

In Russia, it's very common for people to have a middle name based on the father's name, so that if some guy named "Ivan" had a son and a daughter, his son's middle name would be "Ivanovich" and his daughter's middle name would be "Ivanovna."

People from Iceland have last names that are usually based on their father's given name, and sometimes on the mother's, with an ending of "son" or "daughter." This can lead to a name that sounds familiar to us, like "Johannsson," as in "Johann's son." And, to be fair, they'll do this with daughters, and give names that combine the father's name with the word for "daughter." So, there's this cellist and composer I like, Hildur, whose full name says who her father and mother are, and her name is (let's see if I can get this right) "Hildur Ingveldardóttir Guðnadóttir": Hildur, Ingveld's daughter, Guðni's daughter

In the Bible, names mean a lot. They say something:

about who one is;
or what one does;
or where one comes from;
or to whom one belongs.

Isaac: "Laughter."

Esau: "Hairy."

Peter: "Rock."

Jesus: "God saves."

What's in a name?



One day, Jesus was — indirectly, but deeply — dealing with names, and naming, and belonging.

He had said to some people —

ones who had been impressed by him,
who had seen in him something to accept and believe,
who had within them something that could be called “faith,” —

he had said to them that continuing to follow him and obey him would make them able to see the truth. And (those now famous words), “the truth will make you free.”

This confused them.

This bothered them.

“Free?” they asked. “What do you mean ‘free’? We are not *not* free. We are not, never have been slaves. We are descendants of Abraham. We are his sons. We are his family.”

They didn’t get it.

They didn’t get that Jesus was speaking (as he so often did) not on a literal level, not about physical things, perceptible things, but on a figurative level, about spiritual matters, things perceptible not by the eyes but by a heart enabled to perceive by God.

Here Jesus was talking about spiritual slavery. He was talking about bondage to sin. He was declaring their slavery to and mastery by sin, and identifying himself as the one who would liberate them.

And in doing so, he challenged their assumptions

about belonging,
about identity,
about names.

What’s in a name?



They were, it seems to me, acting out a long-repeated pattern of behavior seen with people, not only those who are not religious, but even by those who *are* religious. And that is the tendency to take great pride in one’s belonging to a group, as if that’s all that matters, with nothing else needed:

no commitment,
no action,
no growth,
no depth.

To such people (who are by no means few in number), all that matters is the name one has. Just that alone is valued: the branding, the tribal identity.

But Jesus wants more.

More than brand loyalty.
More than group identity.
More than tribalism.
More than pious sects and religious ghettos.

What he wants is for us to find our belonging in him.
What he wants is for us to share in his inheritance.
What he wants is for us to bear his name.
But Jesus not only wants. More than that, he *gives*.

He gives welcome.
He gives belonging.
He gives identity.
He gives purpose.

He gives ... himself.
His giving, his gift, is so that you may belong:

to him,
with him,
sharing his love
being his lambs
bearing his name.

Recall, those beautiful words from the beginning of the Heidelberg Catechism:

*Q. What is your only comfort
in life and in death?*

*A. That I am not my own,
but belong—*

*body and soul,
in life and in death—*

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

*He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.*

*He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.*

*Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.*

What's in a name?



We have a name I love: “Trinity Reformed Church.”

But, we’ve got to admit: many don’t get it.

Not the “Trinity.” Not the “Reformed.” Not the “Church.”

But let’s leave aside the lack of understanding of either the first word or the third. That many people don’t get “Trinity” is unsurprising. A good number here may be with them. And “church” is complicated no matter where you are.

“Reformed.” That’s really not understood.

Every so often we get mail at the church addressed to “Trinity Reform Church.” No E-D. Maybe they couldn’t afford those. Maybe they think we’re a synagogue. Maybe they think we’re a correctional institution for juvenile delinquents.

Years ago, when I was in high school, the father of a friend of mine had some fun with the name of some of our denomination’s churches. He was just kidding, of course, having fun with words, as I sometimes like to do. Musing on the Dutch Reformed Churches, from which our own church comes (perhaps First Reformed once bore that name) he gave a little snort. “Much Deformed Church” he muttered.

That hurt my feelings.

Of course, I was only 17.

Older and wiser now, well, maybe just goofier, I think of a deli in the south, fairly popular in Dallas, where I lived for 12 years.

“Schlotzsky’s.”

They had a slogan, back when I lived down there: “Schlotzsky’s: Funny name. Serious sandwich.”

Maybe we should try that — “Reformed: Funny name. Serious church.”

Ah, never mind.

What’s in a name?

Really, this word “Reformed.” As in “Reformed Church,” “the Reformed tradition,” “Reformed theology” — what does that word mean?

What *should* it mean?

Does it point backward? Or forward?

Does it remember the past? Or look ahead to the future?

Is it about accomplishment? Or aspiration?

Really, “reformed” from *what*?

There’s a slogan that has for many years been attached to the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. It may not go all the way back to the time of Calvin, but might rather date from a century or even two after him. But its short version goes something like this: “The church Reformed is always reforming.” If we give it more space and fill it out a little, we might say it like this: “The church that has been reformed is always in need of reformation according to the word of God.”

There are two pieces of this that I find important, and necessary.

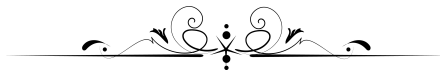
There’s the “always reforming” part. I find the Reformed churches, this one as well, so delightful, so exhilarating, so much on that blessed trajectory of approaching the will of God and the example of the Lord Jesus, when they have

movement,
forward motion,

continual renovation,
reformation,
change.

And there's the "according to the word of God" part. The Reformed churches have that life, that movement, that thrilling spark of *being* the church and actively participating in the body of Christ, when those there are continually measuring their lives against the word of God spoken to them in scripture, in the sacraments, in preaching, and most especially in the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign of the Lord Jesus.

This is what I see, I feel, yet also what I hope for and yearn for in the word "Reformed."
What's in a name?



But do we mean it?

Is "Reformed" for us something we really embody? Is it something that points to Jesus? Or has the name become for us the substitute for a relationship with Christ that "reformed" is meant to name?

I don't want us to become like those believing-yet-not-quite-believing folk in the passage from John, who found their belonging in a name and felt that that was all they needed.

Reformed churches are no strangers to religious tribalism. Yet, a good number of them have become closed off, insular, forming (even today) something like religious ghettos. Too many have no understanding or relationship with the neighborhoods in which they stand. They have little connection with or even knowledge of the other church communities in their area.

I deplore this tendency. I believe it is a sin. I also think that it is no longer tenable. It is unrealistic, and self-defeating. In our highly secular age, in which religious pluralism is a fact of life, in which frequent and regular worship is no longer widely practiced, we can no longer act as if our way of being Christian were obvious, special, privileged, or even understood.

One of my big regrets from my time here is that I do not know the leaders of the four Christian congregations that are within a mile of our place.

This brings me to something I need to say about this day, Reformation Sunday. Over the years I have become uncomfortable with Reformation Sunday.

I have often found in such celebrations a bit of self-satisfaction, which is at least in tension if not in direct conflict with the word of God.

I have heard in such services, at times, a tendency to caricature other Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, at minimum making the differences between us bigger than they really are, at worst portraying their beliefs so inaccurately as to slander them. Too often, we find wild misunderstandings not only of *their* doctrines but of ours as well.

I have been suspicious that celebrations of Reformation Sunday tend to maintain and reinforce the churchly ghettos people (even Reformed people) build.

I cannot accept this. I cannot be a party to this. Which is why for some time I have said that I don't *celebrate* Reformation Sunday, but rather I *mark* it, taking it as an occasion for reflection, for prayer, for repentance, for hope, for seeking to understand even a little more others and myself.

One of my theology professors (she, an Episcopalian who had converted from Conservative Judaism and taught at a United Methodist seminary) said years ago that I am Reformed to my very bones.

I know people who would disagree with that. They and I have different understandings of what “Reformed” does and should mean.

What, after all, is in a name? For me, my understanding of Reformed faith and action and theology leads me away from our inclination to form church ghettos and toward cooperation with other churches, toward ecumenical engagement. Because I believe that there is more that unites us than divides us.

This is not the same as interfaith activity, working with, for instance, Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus, among others. Although I believe that this, too, has its place. Especially on this day when we all should mourn in solidarity with our Jewish friends for the 11 dead in Squirrel Hill, massacred by a man filled with hate toward Jews. This, in a week when bombs were mailed to political figures (some of them Jewish) hated by the would-be-bomber. This, in a week when a white man who hated black people went to a black church to kill and, when he found the doors locked, went to the grocery store and there gunned down two African American shoppers.

How can Reformed churches, how can *this* Reformed church, act as if they have nothing to say, no action they can take, no conversations they can hold, no space they can offer, to those outside their walls, no matter what faith they profess, if any?



What’s in a name?

If the name is “Reformed,” I believe what’s in the name must show a heart that is active, and humble, and generous, and cooperative.

And that is fundamentally because our identity is in Jesus Christ. And Jesus wants more than brand loyalty and group identity and tribalism, more than pious sects and religious ghettos. Jesus wants us to find our belonging in him, to share in his inheritance, to bear his name.

And just as he wants, and commands, and calls, he also *gives*.

He gives welcome.

He gives belonging.

He gives identity.

He gives purpose.

He gives himself.

His giving, his gift, is so that we may belong:

to him,

with him,

sharing his love

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