

## What's in a name?

Luke 2:15-21/Philippians 2:5-11  
The Name of Jesus

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"What's in a name?" Shakespeare famously wrote, continuing "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." And while this rather poetic statement makes for a quotable quote while also serving to advance the essential plotline of the two star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet, there are some people, some cultures, even, who might debate his conclusion.

Because for the pervasive culture of the ancient near east at the time that the bible was written—as well as for many more traditional cultures around the world even today—a name was believed to represent the *essence* of a person's character.

"What's in a name?" we might ask on a day like today, with the texts and themes before us? "What's in a name?" Well, from a biblical perspective you might say "everything!" That's why in the Israelite-Hebrew culture at Jesus' time as well as in many cultures still today, a child is not named on the day he or she is born—and certainly not before they are born—but rather one week later, on the eighth day.

Which brings us to today. On the eighth day of celebrating Jesus' birth—which would actually January 1<sup>st</sup>, but we've shifted the texts and themes to this nearest Sunday—we remember that he was circumcised on the eighth day and that he was given the name "Jesus," which as Luke reminds us was the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb (2:21). Now some of you know that the name Jesus, is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua, which literally means "he saves." And within that name is the very essence of Jesus—his life, his mission, his purpose. He saves. Encoded into his very name the fact that Jesus has come to this world, come to live among us, come to be one of us, in order to save us—to save and redeem and restore and reconcile all humanity, and all of creation to God's own self. So as we continue our celebration of God's incarnation, of Christ's coming among us at Christmas, we remember both the universality of his birth—that he came to save all of us and to reconcile all of creation—but at the same time, and perhaps a bit more today, we celebrate its specificity. We are reminded that Jesus was born at a particular time, in a particular place, to a particular people with a particular culture. And as unique as his birth was, it also followed those cultural patterns of being named, claimed, marked, associated in a particular way to his family and people.

What's in a name? It's a person's essence, their individual identity, to be sure. But also in a name is a whole assumed network of relationships. We all know that on a certain level, that our names link us to one another in complex but rather logical ways. Many of us have experienced that "small world" feeling when a name reveals to us a relationship that we didn't realize existed before, or how two people we know in different contexts turn out to be related. For instance, I got a text on New Year's Eve from a member here who was at a party with my second cousin—small world, right? Except that this particular 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin I only met for the first time about two years ago, and that only because his last name, Lokensgard, is the same as my mother's maiden name. And I happen to know through family folklore, that anyone—anyone!—in North America with the last name Lokensgard is at most my third or fourth cousin.

What's in a name? Names contain and reveal identity as well relationship, individual essence as well as essential community. I learned this in a whole new way when we were living in Senegal, when each of us in our family was assigned a new name—a Senegalese name—by friends or colleagues there. In various circles, and to varying degrees the four of us were known as Pate Ba, Elhadji Ba, Sidy Ba and Salimata Fall. Now this sounds a bit weird on the surface, and believe me, at first I wasn't so sure about it. I mean, I had a perfectly good name when I arrived in Senegal, one my parents gave me, one that had been working just fine, thank you very much. I couldn't quite figure out why folks there needed to assign me a new name, a new identity. It's not my fault, I thought, in my most defensive and huffy internalized voice, it's not my fault that you can't remember or pronounce or relate to my name.

Now, to be clear, this was the reaction I had at first, within weeks of my arrival in Senegal, when lots of different people had tried to give me a new name, mostly people I encountered during our orientation and even at the more touristy places we visited right off. Language teachers, vendors in market places, guides on the boat heading out to see the slave museum on Goree Island, people we were buying furniture and appliances from, they all seemed to be trying to re-name me, based, it seemed to me, on little or nothing at all.

I remember hearing from other people, foreigners visiting Senegal on a short-term basis have often had a similar reaction—this is weird, why is everyone trying to give me a new name? Tourists—whether people disembarking their cruise ships or visiting beaches or even folks coming for a short-term mission trip, they had a hard time seeing this as anything but a gimmick, a way for the locals—and especially people trying to sell you things—to attach themselves to you. In that sense, it was pretty off-putting.

It was only later, after we'd started settling in to our new home, into our community that we were once again offered new names—names that really meant something, really said something about both the community offering that name and about our connection with that community. It was only later—maybe even a few years after our arrival—that I began to embrace my new identity as Pate Ba. Unlike the various and nefarious names I had randomly been given by people mistaking me for a tourist, Pate Ba actually made some sense to me. For instance, by then it had become clear that, the accompaniment work of the ELCA was most closely related to the Fulani people group. So it only seemed natural for me to be given a Fulani family name: Ba. As I remember it, at least three different people—Samba Ba, Soule Ba and Aminata Ba all decided that I should have the last name Ba—their last name.

Ba was a strong family name—typically the extended Ba family had been shepherds, which fit on a number of levels, I suppose, but beyond that, they were herdspeople of relative means: middle class shepherds, upwardly mobile shepherds, entrepreneurial shepherds. The more I learned about the Bas, the more I began appreciating being part of this family, part of this clan. Now, the first name Pate not only seemed to go well with my own given first name—Pate, Peter—it also carried some significance in Fulani culture as to the birth-order. Neither the oldest nor the youngest, I was right in the middle of the family system, which is where Pate usually

showed up. This was no longer a random assignment of a more familiar name. Those three friends named Ba who basically invited me into their extended family had thought this through. It began to make sense to me that I was named Pate Ba, just as it later made sense that Elijah was El Hadji Ba—because it sounded right, and also reminded people of a Senegalese soccer player, and that Simon became Sidi Ba, sharing both first and last name with an older friend who shared his birthday. And it didn't throw anyone off that Sarah was actually not a Ba at all, but that her name was Salimata Fall, connected to a different family, a different clan, a different tribe altogether, just as many Senegalese families belonged to more than one family, clan or even tribe through marriage.

But that's where this new name, this new Senegalese identity started to be really interesting. Because the more I embraced the name Pate Ba—the more I even introduced myself with that name—the more I began to be counted among the Fulani, the more my relationships differently became defined. I began to discover a whole network of relationships—what are often referred to as joking relationships or teasing cousins both within the families and clans of the Fulani and between the Fulani and other ethnic groups. We Bas I found out, had a natural affinity with the Sow family, and a natural rivalry with the Ka and the Diallo families. And all four of us—the Ba, Ka, Sow and Diallo families—had a sort of love-hate relationship with the Sy and the Aidara families, who traditionally were the royalty among the Fulani. I was let into all of this thanks to being re-named Pate Ba. Which people I was allowed or even expected to tease, which folks always had my back, all of that was encoded into this new name, this new identity, this new community. I'm probably not doing it justice in explaining, but put it this way: it went far beyond the sense of a nickname: in receiving this new identity, I was truly considered a member of the Ba family, of the Shepherding clan, of the Fulani people.

What's in a name? All kinds of things. A name is a sign, a gateway, a portal to one's identity as well as one's community. A name can contain within itself a blessing, a confession of faith, a whole host of promises. Think about this in terms of baptism—like the baptism of Vanessa earlier this morning. For a long time people used the word “Christening” as a synonym of baptism. In Baptism, we are Christened or named, and we are Christ-ened, putting on the name and identity of Christ, entering his community. Baptized into Christ, we bear the name of Christ, we align ourselves with his identity, we are received into his community.

And that—baptism—brings us back to our observance, our celebration today. Since through baptism we all bear the name of Christ, share his identity, enter into and in fact form his community, let us embrace that identity. Or, as Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, let the same mind be in **us** that was in Christ Jesus. Yes, let us share his identity, his mind, his will, his mission. Let us take his name—his identity, his community, his mission—out of this place again today.

What's in a name? There is power and purpose in this name that we bear. Amen.