



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Holy Name

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

January 1st, 2012

I would be most surprised if many of you have organized your New Years' day around celebrating the Feast of the Holy Name. That's the official designation for January 1st in our prayer book. The eighth day of Christmas was historically known as the Feast of the Circumcision – Jesus, in compliance with Jewish tradition would have had his bris. Not many will probably dwell on that either! New Year's Day is football, one final caloric blast of traditional foods and resolutions. It is in the resolutions that we might find some reason to give some thought to names and naming.

I find names to be such an intriguing subject – one that has played out in interesting ways in my life. Ordination gave me a status as a priest and with it, no end to questions – “What do we call you?” It is often a puzzlement for those who encounter women priests. If guys become “Father” as a consequence of their ordination – should I not be “Mother?” Of course – but ick! Who wants to do that? Some of my friends at the time of my ordination decided that I should be Father Sharon – the cake even said “Congratulations, Father Sharon.” I liked it because it was a little off center and wacky. As much as I sometimes rail at the forced informality of our culture, in the context of my ministry with you, I am truly comfortable being known as Sharon, which is after all the name I was given at my birth and baptism, and therefore, how God knows me. This confusion and discomfort is actually a good exercise. You all seem to have found your own comfort level with whatever you have chosen to call me.

When I was divorced some years ago, I chose not to keep the name that I'd had for 25 years. I also discovered that I was no less comfortable going back to my father's family name. I knew what I didn't want to be called but no idea where to go from there. I scoured family genealogical materials and in the midst of a litany of really boring names found a fascinating woman name Penelope Von Princen – but as much as I admired her spirit and independence, taking her name seemed over the top. I finally decided that the only thing that I could do was to ask God what my name was – so I prayed. In a very short time – literally minutes as if appearing on the computer screen in my brain – I saw it – Gracen – spelled Grace with an “n”. My initial reaction was that it felt almost presumptuous to name myself something that speaks of God's ultimate gift – grace. I was also aware that having asked, I should be prepared to say thank you to the gift of the name. The amazing thing was that as uncomfortable as all of the other names felt, this one felt just right. So my new name – my true name – was put into my divorce decree and made official by a judge. Despite my now remarried status, I have not changed it. I've been given my name – now I just have to live up to it.

There are many stories in the Bible about names and naming – starting with Adam – all of the animals had been brought to him to see what he would call them. As if something inherent in their being would speak a word that Adam would know. It must have been late in the day when the aardvark came along. I have known people who thought that they were going to name a baby one thing only to meet that child and say – “woah, that's not your name, you are....” It is intriguing that a name –

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something that identifies us, that goes before us and announced us, was most often chosen by someone else. I may have chosen Gracen with some help from God, but my parents chose Sharon.

God seems to have little trouble changing people's names. When something new manifests in a life – it is reflected in their name. Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, that scoundrel Jacob wrestles with an angel and is given the name Israel. Saul falls off his horse, blinded by the light of illumination and he comes up Paul.

The twentieth century was a time when many groups of people claimed the right to determine how they would be called. It is from this that I believe part of the politically correct language movement came into being. The nation of Ghana claimed its name after become independent from the British Empire which had always referred to it as the Gold Coast. Other African countries have claimed the same right. The breakup of the Soviet Union was the occasion for many regions to say "we are not Soviets or Russians; we are the Ukraine, Belarus and Estonia."

It is a frequent challenge to know how to refer to ethnic groups. The NAACP was formed when the appellation "colored people" was used. Since then, black, Black American, Afro-American, African-American. People of color is now a broader term that embraces many beautiful pigments. One no longer says "oriental", Asian is more acceptable. Latino is preferred over Hispanic. And then there was the whole Ms. Thing. In the 1970s the women's movement challenged the presumption that women should always be known by their marital status. It was also when women began retaining their own names after marriage or hyphenating. I find the term "politically correct" to be slightly off the mark because what all of this says to me is more about respect than correct. If negative ethnic epithets were finally understood as impolite at best then maybe we have grown up a little bit. People should not have to suffer being called a name that is offensive to them. So when you find yourself in a linguistic traffic jam, ask for directions. Ask someone "What do you prefer?"

This is a very long, round about way of getting back to New Year's resolutions and names. Our resolutions are often about how we choose to be known. We may choose to be known or seen as thinner, more physically fit, as better communicators, as someone with a neater desk or any number of things that say "I am better than I was."

Do you want to be known as a Christian? Do you want your faith to be that inherent quality that speaks your name? Many of us do not feel called to identify ourselves overtly as Christians, somehow that is felt to be either forcing a religious preference on someone or it identifies us with a negative perception attached to the religion that one sees on television or in the end zone. A dear friend of mine in Beaumont, Texas shared the story of the vigil at his mother's hospital bedside as she died. The whole family was gathered and they shared stories, read psalms and as their mother died, they sang and found joy. Their singing was heard outside at the nurses station and when the family finally left the room, one of the nurses who had been surprised by the joyful noise coming from a room that death had visited, asked my friend "Who are you people, what are you?" He looked at her and said, "We're Christians, we understand death." That family knows how they want to be called.

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Carrie Newcomer is a folk singer from Bloomington, Indiana and one of my favorites. One of her songs is called "My True Name" which made me cry when I first heard it. Carrie says of the song "There is a name that is the essence and combination of all that I am. Whenever that name is known or spoken it is the finest of gifts." A bit of the song goes:

I have been Betty, Eleanor and Rosie
I've been the shamed Magdalene
And if the truth be known, I've attempted Saint Joan
Donna, Sarah and Jane
For we all have our heroes and we all have our tormentors
And we'll play them again and again
But you saw to my center, past every impostor
And you whispered my True Name.

Today on the Feast of the Holy Name, take a moment and look in the mirror and try to see.
What would Adam call you? What is your true name?

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