

Sermon March 8, 2009 Lent # 2 I Will Change Your Name, Salem!

Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem UCC, Denver, CO Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8: 31-38

Here we are on the journey of Lent, a time for us to be reflective, meditative about our faith and how we put it into action. In the last several weeks we came to understand there are many ways in which we express our faith. It can be seen in our prayer life, in our scripture reading, in our attitudes, in our relationships and in our social justice actions. God likewise connects with us in all these ways, when we pray, when we read scriptures, when our attitudes of the Spirit fill us, in our conversations with others and in our social actions as we work for peace and justice.

In the scriptures this morning, we learned that God continually calls us. In Genesis this call to Abram involved a name change for Abram. No longer were Abram and his wife, Sarai known by their names, but a new name was given to them.

In the gospel reading, Jesus, right after Peter's recognition and naming of Jesus as the Messiah, he explains to his disciples that he is a servant. These scriptures are both about servanthood; they are about us and about the church. They are about our work as God's children.

So often people think that the role of the minister is to preach the gospel. St. Francis of Assisi best explained how to do that: he said" preach the gospel at all time, and if necessary, use words."

The real test is not preaching the gospel, but washing one another's feet. We are to be doing the things that do not count in the actual estimate of others. We look to Jesus as not merely one who proclaims the good news, but becomes broken bread and poured out wine for others. We are to be servants.

You and I have been anointed, we have had our name changed. You and I have been called, because of the great love of God. We are God's beloved. In the words of one of my favorite songs, "I shall change your name" by J. D. Butler, the words "no longer are you an outcast, forsaken, or lost, but your new name is "confidence, joyfulness, faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks my face." .

This is the journey that you and I, in this season of Lent continue. It is to clarify and express how we are the disciples of Jesus in this community of faith known as Salem United Church of Christ.

Just like Abram, who had his name changed, because God was going to do a new thing, so too, might Salem's name be changed. We've looked to the past; we've struggled with who we are, with our pastors, with our images, with our history. The future is open to us. Some have explained that the word "Salem" might mean "Peace." It would be good for us in this year of our 125th anniversary to reflect on and to consider what it means to be a church of peace, a church of peace, a church where people can come and worship, celebrate and find that here the love of God that welcomes and accepts, challenges and encourages us to be a people of unconditional love, a love and respect that develops our connections with the God who is still speaking.

A follower asked "What good work shall I do to be acceptable to God."

“How should I know?” said the Teacher. “Your Bible says that Abraham practiced hospitality and God was with him. Elias loved to pray and God was with him too. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him too.”

“Is there some way I can find my own allotted work?”

“Yes, Search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it.”

In this season of Lent, we are searching for those deepest inclinations of our heart here at Salem. This time you and I are to respond what the Teacher said to the preacher who kept saying that “we must put God in our lives.” The Teacher said, “God is already there. Our business is to recognize this.”

We may feel ourselves limited, we may feel outcast, we may have many negative feelings:

To a follower who complained of his limitations, the Teacher said, “You are limited indeed. But have you noticed you can do things today that you would have thought impossible 15 years ago? What changed?”

“My talents changed.” said the student.

“No, you changed.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No. You are what you think you are. When your thinking changed, you changed.

Jesus enters the wilderness to be changed. He is changed. He became stronger in his relationship with God.

We too, have changed in these past 7 months. We have learned that we are capable of doing many things that we didn’t think we could do. Our thinking about ourselves is evolving, growing. We are recognizing that God is with us on our journey.

What name will Salem be called in the future? I envision the following:

**I will change your name
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast
Lonely or afraid**

**I will change your name
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness
Overcoming one
Faithfulness, friend of God
One who seeks my face**

Amen.

(The 3 stories of the disciple, student and teacher are from the book, “One Minute Wisdom” by Anthony de Mello.)