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Epiphany 2 – January 16, 2022

“A New Name”

Read Isaiah 62: 1 – 5/ Memorize Is. 62: 2

Let’s have a little fun this morning. I’m going to say a name, you think about that person. What emotions does the name bring to mind? What nostalgic feature? What accomplishments do you remember or what negatives do they produce in your thinking. Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, Paul the Apostle, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Osama Bin Laden.

Here’s the second set: Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, a special teacher or best friends. What’s the difference between the two sets? The first you’ve heard or read about. The second you likely know intimately.

Charles Swindoll reminds us that in *Pilgrim’s Progress* the pilgrim’s name throughout the book is Christian. But that was not his original name. At the start of the allegory, the scene begins with the pilgrim talking with a porter:

“Porter: What is your name?”

Pilgrim: My name is now Christian, but my name at the first was Graceless.”

Swindoll goes on to say, “The same could be said for all of us today who claim the glorious name of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. My name is now Christian, but it has not always been so …” “Prior to the name change, we were Graceless indeed.”

In our understanding, that name change takes place when the waters of baptism flow over us. You might remember that day, or perhaps you’re like me. I was baptized when I was just a few months old. I don’t remember it, yet through God’s work, especially thru my parents, He has kept me mindful of it for all my life.

Before those waters flowed over me, I had a different name. It was Sinner. I was separated from God, apart from His family. As those waters flowed over me I got my new family name, Christian, and a relationship with Jesus.

God's forgiveness changes our identity. It puts us on a new track in life. It also gives us a mission. Because we have been forgiven, in our new identity, we are to forgive others so that they also can inherit that new identity.

Walter Rathenau was born in Berlin, the son of Emil and Mathilde Rathenau, a prominent Jewish family in 1867. His father founded an electrical engineering company. When his father died in 1915 Walter became the chairman of the company and prominent in the new industrialization of Germany.

Walter was a moderate liberal in politics and one of the founders of the German Democratic Party. He rejected the tide of socialism that was sweeping through Germany at that time, and advocated for the privatization of industry and greater work participation in the management of companies. In early 1922 he was appointed Foreign Minister of the republic.

He insisted that Germany should fulfill its obligations under the Treaty of Versailles, while working for a revision of the terms of that treaty. This treaty was hated by the Germans. He also negotiated a treaty with the Soviet Union. Both of these positions infuriated German nationalists, including the still obscure Nazi Party.

In June of 1922, while commuting to his Foreign Ministry office, his car was passed by another with three machine gun armed men who peppered his car with bullets and riddled Rathenau's body. He died at the scene. The newspaper reported that the three assassins were cornered. Two of them ended their lives by suicide. The other assassin, Ernest Techow, was the only one who went to trial.

According to a reporter, Mrs. Rathenau, the victim's mother, wrote to the mother of Ernest saying, "In grief unspeakable, I give you my hand ... say to your son that, 'in the name and spirit of him he has murdered, I forgive him ...'". Her words would again be read in open court as Techow listened at his sentencing.

Techow was sentenced to fifteen years for his part in the assassination. Just five years later, in 1927, he was released for good behavior. The impact of Mathilda's words and forgiveness dramatically changed his life. In prison, he began to seriously study Jewish history, art, literature, religion and culture. He mastered Hebrew, becoming a scholar of Judaism. He also became highly sensitive to issues concerning the Jews.

Techow wanted to atone for his murderous act. He changed his name to Ernest Tessier and joined the French Foreign Legion, becoming a highly decorated officer. While in charge of a legion outpost, he met a legionnaire named Rathenau. He asked if he was related to the late Walter.

The legionnaire stated that he was his nephew. Carefully choosing his words, he told the young man his story and pulled the letter Mathilda had written from a trunk. He explained how her forgiveness and compassion had changed his life.

When France surrendered to Nazi Germany in 1940 Tessier left the Foreign Legion and moved to Marseille. He took a job as a dock worker. It was from there that he began to smuggle Jews out of France to safety in Spain. His efforts enabled over 700 Jews to flee to freedom as a result of the forgiveness he had received.

God has given you a new identity, also. It is His hope that like Ernest, you will also live to make a difference for others. It may not be as dramatic as what Ernest did, but that is not the point. Even small, random acts of kindness can make a difference.

We can make a difference because of the new name and righteousness that comes to us through Jesus. Those two things create quite the transformation in us. It happens because God instills His righteousness in us through our life and work by His grace. Grace is God's "unmerited favor."

I've heard it said that grace is what God does which we do not deserve, cannot earn and will never be able to repay. We were lost in sin, helpless to change on our own, with no possibility of cleaning ourselves up. In our need, we cried out to God for grace. It is our only hope.

Because of His grace God shares His righteousness. By taking on God's righteousness we become right with God. There is a scary thing about God's righteousness. Because God is righteous it means that He will deal with us in a just manner. We should get what we deserve, which the Bible tells us is death because of our sin. Instead, God gives us a redeemer, whom God sent into the world for us.

Jesus took our sins upon Himself and suffered our just punishment for those sins, so that we don't have to. He did it because of His love. He knew that by doing so

our lives would be changed. Now, we have eternal hope. He is the righteous one dying to make sinners righteous which gives us our hope.

That loving gift from Jesus gives us a new start in life through forgiveness, just as it had for Ernest. We don't have to beat ourselves up because of past sins. We don't have to live with guilt and shame. Because we are a new creation in Christ, we can look forward to the day when we will live with Jesus forever.

We are reminded by that forgiveness that Jesus is pouring rivers of living water into us. He does that so that we can disperse it to others so that no matter what our circumstances, we can carry out the work that God has given us to forgive. God does it through us because that is part of His plan.

Through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit He invites us to live up to that new name that we have gotten in Jesus Christ. We rejoice in that new name and identity that we receive through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Because of that faith we come to eat and drink with our Lord and be strengthened in that faith and love towards others.