Trinity UMC

November 20, 2016

Guest Preacher, Irene Dycus

“What’s in a name?”

In our Old Testament reading today, the prophet Samuel placed a stone marker to help the Israelites remember that after they had turned their hearts once again to the Lord, He had delivered them from their enemies. Samuel named that stone Ebenezer, which means “Thus far, the Lord has helped us.” Names matter when they have meaning for us.

Our names matter, our given names and the family names which become ours when we are born or adopted or married. You and I share a family name - Christian - with millions around the world today and millions of other faithful followers who have gone before us. Through the mysterious sacrament of baptism, we are born anew into the Christian family, initiated into the household of faith as Christian disciples. My precious first grandchild, Lila Ruth Dycus, was baptized in this place a year and a half ago. After the Rev. Debora Christiansen dipped her hand into the waters of the baptismal font and placed that hand on that sweet baby’s head, she said, “Lila Ruth Dycus, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Then the church family assembled here on that day pledged to raise Lila Ruth Dycus in the faith. What a holy promise! What an awesome responsibility!

Sometimes that remembrance of who we are and Whose we are lies slumbering within our souls. Most of you know my story. I was raised in the Methodist church, knew I was greatly loved by my home church, but I wandered away for a while. I came to this church 37 years ago, deeply depressed and distraught, at the lowest point in my life, a time when I felt I was a failure as a mother, as a person in general. I had two beautiful sons and a kind, loving, supportive husband, but I felt that my life was empty and void of meaning. On that first Sunday, Brother Dave Hilliard read the Old Testament story of God’s revelation to Moses of the divine name, “I AM.” Talk about what’s in a name! At the exact same moment in this reading when God revealed His name to Moses, the Great I AM revealed Himself to me as well. In the light of His redeeming love and forgiveness, I remembered what it was like to be home, where I was loved just as I am; and I knew I was home once again. All I had to offer Him that day were my emptiness and brokenness. He filled me with His Spirit and began a lifelong process of healing me. Yes, I say “lifelong” because times of brokenness, in many different forms, have been a part of my life. Our God, who died on the cross for our sins, is not a god of the “quick fix” and the “easy out.” But He is a God of immense compassion who is always reaching out to us, who is always a “very present help in times of trouble.”

Within two years of my returning home, God had turned my failure as a mother into the call to teach. The director of Trinity Preschool called me one day close to the end of my Andrew’s year there and said to me, “Irene, anyone who can have a child as nice as Andrew Dycus is bound to be a good teacher. I want to ask you to join our preschool staff next year.” And this miserable excuse for a mother became a teacher, with my only reference coming in the person of my four-year-old son.

My sons used to say to me, “Why are so many of our family pictures taken around the dinner table?” The answer to that question is, “Because that’s where we gather whenever we celebrate a special time in the life of our family. This is where we tell the family stories – over and over again.”

When we gather as a family of faith around this table, the communion table, we remember our Lord and are deeply aware of our family story. We have a shared name and a faith legacy that extends back, not just through the 101 years of this church at the corner of Galloway and Evergreen, but far back through the centuries, all the way back to the original twelve who sat at that table and ate what would be the Last Supper with our Lord before his crucifixion. They did not understand that holy mystery of communion then, and we do not fully comprehend it now, but through our sharing in the elements that represent His body broken for us and His blood shed for us, He provides food for the journey that He calls us to travel in His name. We are part of a faith family, the Christian family, which began with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and those first - often clueless - disciples.

When we read and meditate on His Word in theBible, our family story comes alive for us. We read and re-read, we tell and retell the story of a loving and forgiving God and the stories of those who have traveled before us in this faith journey. When we really study this book, we begin to see ourselves and the stories of our lives written between the lines and interwoven within the biblical story. Gathering around this table and telling and reading our story define us and tell us who we are and Whose we are and what He calls us to do.

We are family, the Christian family here at Trinity. We are part of the family business, founded by God our Father, in which He made the sacrificial initial investment, the life of His Son, so that we might through faith in Him have the promise of eternal life. He is the Chairman of the board, and we all both benefit from and share in responsibility for that family business. And what is the nature of our corporate family business? Our family is commissioned and committed to doing Kingdom Work.

Jesus said to his disciples, who were fishermen by occupation, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” My husband Joe was an avid fly-fisherman. But long before he became interested in fly-fishing, he knew that God had called him to be a fisher of men, of people. He answered that call as a teacher of Sunday school, Disciple Bible Studies, and Companions in Christ studies, and as lay leader and evangelism leader for this church, among other things. He loved the Lord and cared deeply about other people; he was a good friend to many, a kind and loving family man with both our personal family and our church family. After being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he fought a three-year battle with that illness, during which time his health, strength, and energy lost ground daily, but also during which his faith and love for God were never diminished. At the end of that agonizing journey, he finally walked, unafraid, through the valley of the shadow of death and passed through to the other side. And I know that he walked right into the arms of our loving God, healed forever. Throughout his illness we knew that the Holy Spirit was with us, and we also knew that we were in your prayers. That comforting knowledge has continued to sustain me in the days and now years following his death. If he were still alive, today would have been our 45th wedding anniversary. Do you know how much I love you? Do you know what a difference this faith family has made in my life and the life of my family?

We bear the name of Jesus Christ. We are called to serve an all-loving and self-sacrificing God, and we do it imperfectly. But we are learning, you and I, as we go along on this journey together how to love those who may be very different from us in so many ways - sexual orientation, immigration status, economic and educational background, political beliefs. We’re learning, sometimes the hard way, to say, “The Christ in me honors the Christ in you. The Christ in me embraces the Christ in you. The Christ in me celebrates the Christ in you.”

As participants in our family business, we must acknowledge that we have already received our inheritance– the Kingdom of God. But the only time we can truly claim possession of it is when we are giving it away. We don’t have to argue about who’s the greatest or who will sit in the place of honor at the head of the table. Our job is to sit at His feet and learn from him. Then we follow His example as servants in all we do. We concentrate on serving the meal to those who think they don’t deserve it. We practice radical hospitality because that’s what He did and what He continues to do through us. The transformative power of God’s grace is at work in and through this faith community. Oh my, talk about a blessing and a challenge!

But what about our resources? Do we have enough to see that this job gets done? Are we willing to pay the price that carrying on the family business demands of us?

Let’s put things in the proper perspective here. Here’s a question for you; are you ready for it? What value would you place on the life and soul of any person in this room, any person who has already come to us, any person who will come to us, any person to whom we will go? What price would you be willing to pay to see that any of our children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren might come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? What’s my little Lila or Nora worth to you, our Carson or Sean or Rowan or Kate or Kadynce or Lily or Charlie or Audrey or Jacob or Hadley or Harper or Finn or Sully or Joey or Dean or Cameron or Mason, our regulars and semi-regulars? What price would you place on the life and soul of the next young mother who walks down one of these aisles, broken in spirit and heart? Or anyone else who comes to us, broken in any way? Tell me: what are any or all of them worth to you – their lives, their hearts, their souls?

All that we have is a gift from God. There is not a single self-made person in this room, in this world. All that we have – all that we are – belongs to God, because it all came to us as a gift from Him. We must realize that we already have more than adequate resources because we are already so richly blessed. If we truly begin to share our resources, this church and its ministries will lack for nothing. We operate out of a state of abundance, most especially – I will say it once again - through the transformative power of God’s grace at work in and through this faith community. We see it in our ministries such as the Room in the Inn, Manna on Mondays, our care for our homebound and ill members, our prayer and Bible study groups, Covenant Disciple groups, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, our United Methodist Women, our music ministries, our participation in Project Transformation, the fledgling Wednesday night program for families, and the vision of a Midtown/North Memphis Youth Group. That amazing grace also empowers those who are our partners in ministry – and yes, they are not just rent-paying tenants, they are partners in ministry – Midtown Montessori School, Narcotics Anonymous, Art Stew, the SERVS program, and others.

Our resources coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit represent the tremendous potential of our family business. They enable us to reach out in the name of Jesus Christ to the last, the lost and the least, to speak out against injustice and to speak up for those who either cannot or do not know how to speak up for themselves.

This church, our beloved Trinity Church, now finds itself in difficult financial straits. But the only thing that could possibly cause us to collapse into fiscal bankruptcy is the greater danger of our spiritual bankruptcy. I hope you understand, brothers and sisters in Christ, that this is not a message of despair but a message of hope. For I profoundly believe that God has great plans for us to serve Him for years into the future, but in order for this to happen we need to open our hearts to more generous giving. We must discover that it’s not what’s in our wallets; it’s what’s in our hearts! It’s how much we love God and how thankful we are to Him, how deeply grateful we are for our many blessings. Stewardship – giving of our financial resources, as well as all other resources – is an essential part of discipleship, and there is no room for tightfistedness in this relationship between us and our Lord.

The human heart is typically about the size of a fist. But the heart is not a fist; it’s a hollow, muscular organ that pumps life-sustaining blood throughout our bodies, in from our veins and out through our arteries. Jesus Christ does the same thing in our spiritual lives. Jesus Christ says to us, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my name.” When we honor this covenant and invite His Holy Spirit into our hearts, then those same hearts beat in rhythm with His; his life-sustaining blood flows through us, giving us hearts for ministry. It is at that point that we begin to acknowledge who we are and Whose we are. It is then that we finally begin to claim that name, to live up to and to live into our family name.

My name is Christian. Your name is Christian. Our name is Christian. What’s in this name? Love and forgiveness, repentance and redemption, healing and wholeness, peace and reconciliation, hope and joy, life in the here-and-now and life in the hereafter, the Kingdom coming and the claiming of the Kingdom right this very minute, everything worth having and everything worth sharing. What’s in our name, this name we share, the name Christian? Everything! Everything! **Everything**!