

# Message: What's in a name?

Pastor Riva Tabelisma

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer and my refuge. Amen.

We all have names. Some of us may have nicknames too. Parents name their children in very creative ways. Here's a perfect example – my full (first) name is Riva Ruth, this is different from the American way of categorizing a name – that will be for another discussion. Anyway, Riva is a condensation of my mother's name Rebecca, and Ruth is to honor the many Ruths in our family, as we remember the life of Ruth (in the Bible). My younger sister's name is Hessed Rina – Hessed is the simplified Hebrew word meaning love and compassion for others. My parents named her Hessed because she was born September 21, and this date is closely related to Martial Law in the Philippines where the Marcoses ruled and oppressed the country. When my sister was born, my parents were involved in social justice against the Marcos regimen, so I think they thought that it was fitting to name her to show their advocacy of love and compassion. Rina is the conflation of my parents' name – Rebecca and Nathanael. Finally, my younger brother's name is Amos Jay. As church workers who are seeking for social justice in the Philippines, prophet Amos is one of my parents' favorites. And he was named Jay because he has the same birthday as my paternal grandfather, named Jesus. Maybe you can share in the comment section how your name came to be. Nicknames in my tradition is a term of endearment that the elders give to the younger ones. Sometimes nicknames are sweet, sometimes funny, but most of the time we don't want to use our nicknames as we get older.

Other than names, there is also identity. In our present times, identity has become more complex than first and last names. Identity on the other hand is how we would like to be known, or how we are known. This means that for me, my identity would include my values, beliefs, my race, among others. In a world that's supposed to be more sophisticated than the medieval times, citizenship has become part of a person's identity. Unfortunately for the US, this has become very important that if you are not a citizen of this country, you must have the legal documents to be here, otherwise, the government has the right to dehumanize those who are considered illegals by splitting their families and in worst cases, putting people into cages. Names and identities are not only for people. This is also for organizations, places, etc. Our faith community is named Community UMC – and we have an identity that goes with our name. In November of last year, this congregation voted to become a Reconciling Congregation, which means Community UMC decided that it would like to be a welcoming circle for all kinds of people, without conditions. Our statement is printed on the bulletin and I have shared it in our Facebook page again if y'all want to read the complete statement. In simple words, we would like to be identified as a faith circle who tries to embody the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the love that has to be shared for the neighbors – no matter what. And that we want to become the embodiment of God's love to the world, internally – among the whole congregation, and externally – getting out of the confines of our congregation to our Columbia Heights neighborhood. Here's my question for us who are part of the Community UMC body, are we living up to this identity? If so, how? If not, why?

Our passage today talks about how Jesus asked his disciples how he is being identified. In verse 13, Jesus wants to know how people identified him. One reason was that he was not ready to reveal his actual

identity yet, and in fact, he has directed the disciples to as much as possible keep this is a secret. Personally though, it's probably hard for Jesus to keep his identity a secret because of what he has preached and done – miracles and what nots. And how can you keep your identity a secret if more than 5,000 people gather to hear you preach? But Jesus wants to know just the same how people have been identifying him. It is interesting to see how the disciples answered this by relying to Jesus what they heard people say. I think Jesus was doing a loyalty check with his disciples to see if they are following his directions when he asked them in verse 15. We've seen in the passage that Peter knew the answer. Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God. And with this Jesus in a way, promoted Peter to be someone better than where he is at the time. Peter was given more responsibilities in the church that Jesus wants to build. A church that can withstand any destruction, including death. I will leave this part for now, I will circle back to this point later.

I would like to invite you to reflect on Peter. If we will follow Peter's demeanor in the ministry of Jesus and the disciples, we will probably scratch our head, and ask, why did Jesus selected Peter to start this church. Peter's track record as a disciple is not really phenomenal. To name a few, we've read how Peter would not get what Jesus by preaching – he constantly asks 'what do you mean?'. He talks before he thinks – he was impulsive. In the succeeding parts of Jesus' life – he will try to stop Jesus to go to Jerusalem, thus him being called Satan. He was not a reflective person where he thinks more of what is convenient than the fulfillment of God's kingdom. In other words, Peter is one of the most immature among the disciples. But why would Jesus give him the keys to the church that he is building? Why did Jesus choose an immature individual to be the foundation – the rock of the church that he wants to build? I feel like Jesus was giving the keys of the car to a 16-year-old who is so excited to drive and at an impulse can easily overspeed, get a ticket, or worse crash the car and hurt himself or herself. Looking closely, there is more to who Peter is than what testimony says he is. Peter's impulsion can be seen in verse 16, and clearly Jesus recognized this, that's why he said on verse 17 – For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. Jesus was aware that Peter did not reflect on the question. That was enough for Jesus, because it reflects of what Peter thinks of him, in an immature, unfiltered manner.

What does this mean for us, then? The point that I want to underline here is that Jesus did not look at Peter's qualification when he chose him to be the foundation of his church. No matter how unstable and immature Peter is, his testimony speaks of his faith. How do we put this in our context, then? This simply means that we can be part of different ministries amongst us without the seminary degrees. Like Peter, we are called to be the hands and feet of God to the world, be the light and healing to a dark and broken world. In our own ways, God is calling each of us to take the steps to serve our neighbors. No matter who we are. And more than that, God calls us by our name. Isaiah 43:1-7 tells us of this. God said, 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name'. There is a beauty in that because we know that we are called by God to be the beacon of blessings, and we are called – each of us, by name.

I would like to circle back to my point about the church that Jesus built. While the passage talks about the rock being the foundation of the church, I believe that it was not a physical church building that he was talking about. Jesus was talking about the church – as the community that will carry out his ministry to the world. It is interesting to note that Jesus made a reference of the gates of Hades as a source of destruction. For additional context, the mention of the word Hades did not necessarily mean hell or whatever that is, but Jesus was referring it to signify death, physical death. Explaining this further, in the tradition where the Scripture was written, Hades means place of the dead, and is being used here as the allusion of humanity's greatest threat – which is death. Taking this into consideration, this simply means that the church that Jesus is building is a church that will withstand the test of time, definitely not the

physical church where time will eventually consume, especially if we do not properly maintain it. (Thanks to the Trustee-minded people in the church leadership who is on top of this – Bruce, Rod, Karl and Bill)

Now I would like to invite you to see Peter in yourselves/ourselves. God is calling us into ministering to our neighbors. No matter who we are, or where we are in our lives, we are called by God to be ministers to others. And it does not have to grand. In the CoVid era, our ministry can simply be wearing masks when we are around others. In our congregation, it can simply look like bringing food and hygiene products to SACA so that it can reach to our brothers and sisters in need. It can be being the person who someone can call because they are feeling isolated, or maybe even driving for someone who wants to go to a polling station to vote. These are ministries that we can do to continue being the church that calls us to be. And if we want to be called Christians, then we need to live up to that name, which means being the hands and feet of Jesus Christ and of God to this world. What's in a name? The name tells us who we are and whose we are. May it be so. Amen.