

“What’s In a Name?”

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9

Today we baptize Emily Dombrowski and Nathan Bordeaux when God claims them and names them as his own – children of God – chosen by God to grow and learn and thrive.

Proverbs 22:1 - “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.”

The psalms and proverbs are chucked full of the conventional wisdom of ancient Israel. The idea that one’s name or one’s reputation is more important than material wealth is a conventional idea 3,000 years ago in Israel and is written in other places like Ecclesiastes 7:1, which states that, “A good name is better than precious ointment.” “Dombrowski” and “Bordeaux” is better than precious ointment.

We need to understand that “a good name” meant a lot more in ancient Israel than it does in many cultures today, including our own. So it’s sometimes difficult for us modern readers to comprehend the importance of a “good name.”

Some of it depends on how we were raised and when we were raised. When I as a boy would ride with my grandfather or great-grandfather to deliver a load of hay or straw to the Cleveland mounted police station, or Thistledown, or Northfield Park, or to a local Landmark store, or to the Thursday sale in Kidron, I was always amazed at how people knew our name. My grandfather taught me to

have pride in having the best alfalfa around and that I should always work harder than the neighboring farmers because that's what our family was known for. No one could put up as many bales in a day as we could. My grandfather was a throw back to ancient Israel. Our good name, our reputation was far more important to him than great riches. It was even more so with my great-grandfather who outlived and outworked even my grandfather. During the depression, after the banks failed, he gave out loans to neighboring farmers so they wouldn't lose their land and then had them work it off by working on his threshing crew. They were never rich, but they took pride in their reputation and in their labor.

Some of you eighty-somethings remember a flamboyant pre-W.W. II actress named Mae West who said, "It's a story I wrote myself, about a girl who lost her reputation and didn't miss it." The writer of Proverbs says that a good reputation is something we should miss if we lose it.

Most of us have been to funerals and heard friends and loved ones eulogized. While funerals are a time of grief and mourning, they are celebrations as well. When a person, like Betty Pabst, has lived a long life of faith, when a person has worked hard at honoring other people and honoring God, you cannot stop people from sharing memories. When a person has not lived a life of faith in serving God and people, it is tough to know what to say other than we're dependent on God's grace and forgiveness in Christ.

I think the question of our name is a eulogy question. If we were to die on

the way home today, what would our funeral feel like? Would it merely be a somber sense of loss or a celebratory recognition of a life well lived? What would mark our life? What would be said in our memory? How would our children remember us?

Unfortunately for our young people, we live in a day when sports headlines provides a picture of what happens when your name gets tainted. If you're a baseball fan, what comes to mind when you hear these names? Bonds. Clemens. A-Rod. Rameriz. Ortiz. McGuire. Canseco. And the steroid list goes on and on. These guys spent years basking in the glory of their astronomical success. But steroid use smeared their accomplishments and fouled major league baseball.

For me, the worst example is Barry Bonds. A power hitter with a gorgeous swing, following in his father's footsteps. He broke Hank Aaron's career record of 755 home runs. But when it came out he was using steroids, his name was smeared and his record questioned. When multi-millionaire Mark Echo bought Bond's record breaking home run ball, he scrawled a giant asterisk on it with a sharpie and donated it to the baseball hall of fame for all to see.

A record and a reputation with a giant asterisk on them prove the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin who wrote, "It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation; and only one bad one to lose it."

The wisdom of Proverbs is that we be people without asterisks, that we choose to have a good name rather than great riches.

Yet we are reminded in the New Testament that we are not saved by our good name or our good deeds but only by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Our good name and good deeds are in response to what God did for us in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

In verse 8, we are reminded that if we choose not to love God and neighbor and sow injustice instead, we will reap calamity and our rod of anger will fail.

In verse 9, "those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor."

So are we angry, reluctant Christians who sow injustice and anger or are we generous Christians who share our bread with the poor, who enjoy serving others? Do we serve others out of a sense of duty and fear or do we serve others out of a sense of commitment and love? Are we slaves serving because we think we have to or are we servants serving others out of willingness, choice, and voluntary commitment?

The wisdom of Proverbs distinguishes between servitude and servanthood because throughout biblical history right up to today, God's people continually get entangled in servitude out of fear of not pleasing God or not pleasing people around us enough. It is all too easy for us to fall into the mind-set that if I overdo in my serving others, I will ingratiate myself with God and with people around me, making up to them in one area what I may be lacking in others. I'll be covering the

difference between servitude and servanthood in greater detail in the course . . .

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If I’m a baseball player, I’ll inject steroids out of fear that I may not be good enough without them. If I’m a grandparent, I’ll babysit my grandkids even if I’m not feeling up to it. To stay on my boss’s good side, I’ll work overtime even though it means missing my daughter’s concert. If I’m a pastor, I’ll never go on sabbatical because the church can’t function without me. All of these are examples of enslavement, of servitude rather than servanthood.

Before leaving here on this Labor Day weekend, let us know the difference between being a slave and being a servant.

Think about the last time you wanted to help someone who was in a crises, who was stuck in the mud. Did you want to help for the recognition and to please others or did you want to help out of love and commitment? Did you jump into the mudhole and become totally submerged in the other’s problems or did you respond with empathy in reaching out to that person helping them back to stable ground? Did you become enslaved to that person’s problems or did you remain free to serve them along the way?

We know we are enslaved when we are being manipulated by the person we are trying to help. Some of the best manipulators I’ve tried to help over the years are alcoholics. Their spouses tell me about the phone calls they’ve made to excuse

their alcoholic's lateness or absence from work. Those phone calls are not loving acts of servanthood but destructive acts of servitude that enslave the whole family.

If we love people and want to serve them and help them, we try to meet their needs, not their wants. Being a true Christian servant means not allowing ourselves to be manipulated. And when we are manipulated, we learn from it and move on.

One of the three foster-daughters I got to reconnect with this summer during my trip out west – was Terri – the great manipulator. Again, we were trying to live out the wisdom of Proverbs in being generous with what God had blessed us with in sharing our home and our bread with a homeless teenager.

Terri was a big, strong, tough, street-wise, blonde 17 year old who came in one night well after curfew making her way down the stairs to her basement bedroom. Tired of being manipulated, I was hot on her heels, walking into her bedroom to confront her. She had a bottle of Schnapps in her hand that she defiantly took a swig from in front of me. I grabbed the bottle from her hands, turned around and headed to the bathroom sink where I was pouring it out when I looked up and saw her coming at me with both fists flying. I got her back into her bedroom and slept outside the door on the floor the rest of the night. We took her to a 30 day residential treatment program the next day while finding other bottles she had hid in her bedroom and in our garage. It was a long senior year for her and us. But it was worth it.

Today, Terri is married and the proud mother of a beautiful daughter and son. She lives in a nice West Fargo, North Dakota home with a fenced in backyard with a swing set, trampoline, sandbox, and other toys for the eight children that come to her house everyday for daycare. Terri is in a woman's Bible study group and actively serves in her church.

During our visit she thanked me for being there for her at a time in her life when she was not a nice person. She also confessed that the night I was sleeping on the floor outside her door, she snuck back out again through the basement window where her friend was waiting for her. I really didn't need to hear that.

We are called to be servants, not slaves. We are called to servanthood, not servitude. We are called to be generous with what God had blessed us with and to share our bread with the poor. We chose a good name rather than great riches.

I always remember the example of Jesus when he willingly washed his disciple's feet – not as a demeaning task but as an act of selfless love. Christ defined servanthood when he said that “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28).

Theologian Dom Helder Camora wrote: “Do people let you down? Don't carry them on your shoulders. Take them into your heart.”

May the peace of God . . .

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