

## The Cost of “Naming Rights”

[Texts - Genesis 17; II Cor. 5:14-20]

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Two years ago, the Cleveland Browns secured a new source of revenue, by selling the “naming rights” of Cleveland Browns Stadium. For a reported \$102 million, Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp. sealed the deal and claimed the prize. The stadium is now called “FirstEnergy Stadium, Home of the Cleveland Browns.” That’s a pretty lengthy name; but when you’re paying a pretty penny [or in this case 10 billion, 200 million pennies] you probably want to stretch it for all it’s worth! And you certainly want that name to reflect the business interest of the buyer. “FirstEnergy Stadium, Home of the Cleveland Browns” may be a bit on-the-nose, but there is absolutely no doubt as to who paid the price to put that name up there for all to see!

Two weeks ago on Ash Wednesday, many of us, like millions of others around the world, received a sign on our foreheads. It wasn’t a permanent sign. [Fortunately, this year I remembered to let the burning Palm branches cool, before applying the ashes. Again, my sincere apology to last year’s first recipient.] Anyway, as that sign was being put up there, for all to see, we heard these profound words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” There it is, the harsh and inescapable truth: we were all born; and we will all die! Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. However, as I noted that evening, those ashes are not applied randomly. They make the distinct Sign of the Cross - to remind us of who we are, *Whose* we are, and Who paid that greatest price to seal the deal!

In his second letter to the Corinthian Church, Saint Paul writes, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: everything old has passed away; behold, everything has become new! ....The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that One has died for the sake of all” Traditionally, Holy Baptism is the first time that Christians are marked with the sign of the Cross. Historically, each person at their “Christening” received a new “Christian” name. The

purpose of that new name, is to remind us that throughout our faith journey, we can leave our old life behind and engage in the process of living a new and renewed existence.

The Bible is filled with stories of redemption; with examples of people whose lives are turned around through their encounter with the Holy One. Old and childless Abram and Sarai are given the promise of offspring. And with that Divine promise, they receive new names to affirm and seal the deal. *Abram* is changed to *Abraham*, which means “father of many”, and *Sarah* is told that she will be the “mother of many nations”.

Jacob, the scheming scoundrel who constantly plots and struggles to get the better of others, wrestles with his conscience and with his God one lonely night; and is transformed into Israel, the patriarch of a great nation.

Jesus changes impulsive and unpredictable Simon’s name, to Peter, which means “the Rock” - a foreshadowing of the steadfast faithfulness that volatile Simon will develop - a rock-solid steadiness that will serve him well as a Church leader.

And when Saul, the proud persecutor of Christ’s followers, has a vision of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he is dramatically changed. He takes the new name *Paul* [which means “small”]. And a new and humbler person emerges - one who will accomplish tremendous things to advance Christ’s mission of compassion and grace.

In all these instances, that new name comes as a prelude - as a promise of better things yet to come. I believe that there is a tangible power in what people are called - for better and for worse. Calling someone “stupid” or “lazy” or “clumsy” only reinforces those negative attributes; while calling them “kind” or “generous” or “a dear friend”, goes a long way in helping them live up to those positive, affirming qualities.

This morning, I’d like us to try something that may seem a little strange; but of course, I am a little strange! I accept that, and I gladly own it! I’d like each of us to imagine - that if God gave us a new name,

to affirm us and to inspire our lives - what might we be called. As a gay man, I have been called strange, queer, faggot, and even worse. And while those names can hurt terribly, and burn deeply, they have lost their power over me. I know that my Baptismal name is *David*, which means "beloved by God!" I know that I have been marked and claimed and redeemed by the Cross of Jesus Christ! For when I truly accepted that my Holy Source accepts me and loves me just as I am, those other words lost their punch. I *am* strange, queer, and different; and I am grateful for that!

Fortunately, I've never been attacked for being a *faggot* [the term for that bundle of sticks used to burn homosexuals, heretics, and other outcasts at the stake]. However, I do know One exceptional individual who was nailed to a stake and brutally killed - because he kept-on insisting that people like me, and you, and all others, are loved and precious in the sight of our Divine Creator. Jesus Christ was willing to pay the ultimate price to claim us all and to name us all, as Beloved Children of God. And that Divine Power of Life and Love which continues to grow and spread in Christ's name, can help you and me to claim new names and to experience renewed and fulfilled lives.

So...what do people call you? How do you see and identify yourself? And most importantly, who would you really like to be? Sometimes it can be helpful to face those negative names or attributes that have been attached to us, and to envision ourselves as the complete opposite - to negate their power and punch. It is extremely freeing to realize, that no matter how horrible those labels may be, they are totally superceded by that Greater Name - and Higher Love - of Jesus Christ.

Today, and every day, you and I wear and share Christ's label and sign:

The sign of a Deadly Cross, that overcomes death itself.

The sign of a Holy Baptism, where you and I are "Christened" with a new name and a renewed purpose.

The sign of Bread and Cup - the Holy Communion of this Holy and Wholesome Community.

These are all signs of that “New Creation”, where the Love of Christ welcomes us all, inspires us all, and moves us faithfully forward on our journey. Together, you and I can help and encourage one another to be the best person that we can be! And that is worth far more than anything money could ever buy.