

The only name that matters

Colossians 1:3-20

November 25, 2007

The First Congregational Church of Waterloo ... The Congregational Church in Cumberland ... The First Congregational Church of Scarborough.

These are the names of the three churches I have served as called pastor in my career as a minister, all of them proud of their names, all of them proud of their congregational identity and heritage ... proud of being congregational, proud of taking responsibility themselves for the life and work and well-being of the church, proud of being involved partners in the decision-making and leadership-taking and direction-setting, proud of being people who come to church to be the church.

I am proud of that name, too. I chose to be a minister in the congregational tradition. I like the congregational emphasis on the priority of the local church, the belief that the strength and substance of the church is best expressed not in denominational pronouncements, but in the faith as it is practiced community by community, congregation by congregation.

I like the fact that congregationalism is organized from the bottom up, not the top down, that leaders function as servants, not as rulers.

I like the freedom of a congregation to choose its own leadership, the freedom to set its own priorities as its members listen together for the leading of God's Holy Spirit, the freedom to make associations by choice, by promise, by covenant, not merely by mandate.

I am proud of our name. I am proud of our congregational identity and heritage. But there are other churches too, other congregations, proud of their names, proud of their traditions.

There are Lutheran churches, named for Martin Luther, their founder, a German reformer, like him glorying in God's redeeming grace, humbly counting on God's empowering grace. strong in proclaiming the wonders of the gospel.

There are Methodist churches, named for the nickname given their founders, English reformers, who held themselves to a careful, methodical discipline of holy living and service to others, churches still marked by that double commitment to personal piety and social responsibility.

There are Baptist churches, named for their emphasis on baptism -- baptism by total immersion -- as the visible sign of saving faith, churches that continue to place a premium on an intentional personal faith and public witness.

There are Presbyterian churches, named for their system of leadership, by groups of elders or presbyters, churches that value order and precision and clear thinking, in worship, in theology, and in church life.

There are Roman Catholic churches, named for the seat of church authority, Rome, and for their self-awareness as the visible expression of a universal, all-embracing church, a church tracing its roots to the original apostles, a church concerned with unity of believers and uniformity of belief and practice.

And there are Greek Orthodox churches, named for their ethnic identity and for their heritage in the Orthodox tradition, a tradition tracing its roots too to the first apostles, but breaking from Rome in the 11th century, churches with a rich and dignified worship style enlivened by extensive use of the visual arts.

So many names and so many different church traditions, and I have only named the names of churches less than a half-mile from ours on West Fourth Street! We are one of seven churches of seven different Christian denominations within a few blocks of each other on West Fourth Street.

We are one of more than one hundred churches, of probably two dozen or more different denominations in the Waterloo/Cedar Falls community, all proud of their names, all proud of their distinctive heritages.

And we are one of 3,826,000 churches on this globe, representing some 39,000 different Christian denominations! 39,000 different Christian denominations, each with a distinctive name, each with a distinctive way of being church.

What are we to make of all these different names, all these different traditions? Which way is a better way? (Each of them thinks their way is the best!) Which name or which names matter most?

None of them. None of these names matters.

We have another name, you know, what you might call our "last name," our denominational name. We are called the First Congregational United Church of Christ. We have been part of the United Church of Christ by vote of our membership for forty-six years. The United Church of Christ is a young church, only fifty years old, but its members churches, the root denominations from which it was formed, each have long and storied histories, prominently interwoven with the settling and growing-up of this nation.

We are called a united church. Our denomination was born for the sake of visible unity, and unity among believers and among churches continues to be of paramount importance for us. We build bridges, not walls. That's why I chose to be ordained in the United Church of Christ, because unity among believers and churches is important to me.

That's one of the reasons, but the primary reason was this line in the Preamble to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. We acknowledge as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.

We are the United Church of Christ. The sole head of the church, the only authority in the church, the one thing that holds us together, the one thing that binds us to other churches of different names and traditions, is Christ. Christ is the only name that matters. The last name of our "last name" is the only name that matters.

As a name, as a denomination, the United Church of Christ doesn't matter. It's just another name, just another name that matters no more and no less than any other church name, which is to say it doesn't matter at all!

Christ is the only name that matters!

Christ is the source of the body's life ... the body that is the church. We are Christians, we follow Christ's way. He shows us the way. He leads the way. He goes with us along the way.

Christ is the source of all life ... *through him God created everything*. Christ is not only the sole head of the church, he is the sole head of every thing, of every power, of every authority, of every nation. God made the world free, but freedom leads to ruin and death unless it is freedom in Christ, freedom that freely chooses to be led by Christ. God endowed humanity with wisdom, but the best of human wisdom is foolishness unless it embraces the wisdom that is in Christ, the wisdom that is Christ.

Christ reveals God to us ... *he is the visible image of the invisible God*. No one can see God. We recognize God like we recognize the wind, by its effects. And yet this wind has a voice, a voice that can be heard, a word that is spoken, a word that is spoken through creation, through history, through law, through God's prophets, through God's Spirit, a word that was made flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, a living word ... Jesus Christ. Christ shows us who God is. When we know and love Christ, we know and love God.

Christ reconciles the world to God ... *through [Christ] God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself*. It's funny -- funny strange -- how so many of our churches, our denominations, value the unity of believers, the unity of Christ's church, but we seem so little able, even so little willing, to do what it takes to make that happen, because we are only willing to accept unity on our terms.

The fact is, we can't make unity happen. We cannot reconcile the divided parts of Christ's church, only Christ can! Unity will never happen based on common interests, common goals, shared values, merged organizations. Unity will happen only on the basis of a common faith, a common faith in Christ. Only Christ can tear down the walls that divide us, and we will only be one when we choose to step over the rubble of the walls of enmity Christ has already demolished!

Christ has reconciled us to God, and in reconciling us to God, Christ has reconciled us to each other. But the picture is bigger than that! Our dreams should not be too small! We should not be satisfied with too little! Christ reconciles not just each church family to God and to itself, but the whole church, and not just the whole church, but the whole world of people, and not just the whole world of people, but the whole universe.

We shouldn't miss the big picture, but you shouldn't miss the little picture either. The one who reconciled the universe to God is the one who reconciles you.

And isn't that why you're here? Because you want to be reconciled? Because you feel distant and you want to feel close? Because you feel out of touch and you want to be in touch? Because you feel disconnected from God and you want to be connected? Because you've been running away from God and you want to come back?

Because you feel like one small speck floating randomly in a chaotic universe and you want to feel like you matter, you want to feel like you belong, you want to know you belong to the One from whom the whole universe came and to whom the whole universe will return?

The one who will reconcile the universe to God is the one who reconciles you -- Jesus Christ. It will not be this congregation or this pastor or congregationalism or the United Church of Christ or any other church or any other denomination that will bring you to God. It will be Christ, only Christ, the only name that matters.