

January 23, 2011

1 Chronicles 16:1-10

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

### “Names”

This past week, those doing the Grand Sweep through the Bible in a year, were assigned the first 18 chapters of the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles. The first nine chapters provide basically a long list of names. This is not easy reading, and I think, if we are honest, ALL of us may have to confess we did a lot of skimming!

Why all these names? Scholars believe that 1 and 2 Kings, which we just finished last week, were written for the Jews in exile. They provided the story of the Hebrew people in the Northern and Southern kingdoms, recounting the rise and fall of each. The people who were taken into captivity in Babylon needed these stories to help them understand what had happened to them.

1 and 2 Chronicles provided another telling of the stories about various kings, especially David and Solomon- so why do we even need these? It seems likely that the books of Chronicles were written for the Jews after they had returned from exile, and were trying to recover their faith and rebuild their cities and communities. 1 and 2 Chronicles focus on Judah, the Southern Kingdom, with only brief references to events or persons in the Northern Kingdom.

Let's consider these names. Since the writings were for the Hebrew people, why doesn't Chronicles begin with Abraham, from whom the Jewish faith and line are traced? By beginning with Adam, chapters proclaim that the Hebrews are part of a race beyond their own—they are part of the human race. In exile, the Jews were without political power, without any worldly standing at all. They clung to their faith, and may have built themselves up by remembering their status as the “chosen people”. They knew their faith, their trust in ONE God, Yahweh, was superior to the faiths of others around them.

So, it is really amazing that the genealogies begin with the very first people on earth, the ancestors of ALL people. Descendants of Ishmael (claimed as an ancestor for the Palestinian Muslims) and of Esau are included. This suggests to me a desire to connect the Jewish people to ALL people, for

indeed we remember WHY they were chosen by God: they were chosen to be a LIGHT TO THE NATIONS. We find this several times in Old Testament Scripture. They were not chosen to be elevated above other people, but to be an example of faithfulness and devotion to God for other nations and faiths.

Next we are given the genealogies of the Hebrew tribes; the Hebrew families. Listings of towns are provided in the midst of the names- towns associated with various tribes. This appears to be a way of proclaiming, in J. Ellsworth Kalas' words: "We were here long ago. We have been exiles for two generations, yes, but we have roots in this land, and it is ours."

So, chapters 1-9 of 1 Chronicles present important genealogies for the Jewish people, returned from exile, rebuilding their land and community.

Chapters 10-29 are the Chronicler's account of David as a great monarch and the founder of the Temple and its ritual. These chapters helped the returned community do two things:

- recognize that we are to live under a moral order established by God
- and to observe clearly established worship practices to honor this God and this truth.

As I have prayed and reflected, I've come to actually cherish some things about those first nine chapters—the lists of names. Think about names. Contrast those with NUMBERS, as they are applied to human beings. When are people known by numbers rather than names? Well, maybe at tax time, when our social security numbers are critically important? But our names need to be included as well. The number doesn't TAKE OVER our names.

But when a person is imprisoned, what about that number? Or think of the Nazi Holocaust, when concentration camp inmates had their numbers tattooed on their skin? Numbers are impersonal—even inhuman. They do not describe us. They can't NAME us.

GOD knows our NAMES. Think about other Scripture stories that include the importance of names. When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, he calls him by name from his tomb: "Lazarus, come out!" Mary Magdalene, sobbing at the tomb of Jesus doesn't recognize him until he calls her by name: "Mary!"

The Old Testament reading today tells us we are NAMED and KNOWN by God. We are each known personally and cherished as a unique, one-of-a-kind gem made by God himself.

The lectionary Epistle reading from the New Testament, gives us another side of NAMES.

In this portion of Paul's letter to the ancient church in Corinth, we discover that his friends in that church community had begun using names to divide themselves from one another.

Paul helped found that church during his missionary travels. But he received a report from "Chloe's people", that there was quarreling and bickering among the brothers and sisters there. The members were splitting into groups, defining their loyalties around various personalities in the church. Some preferred Paul, since he was their founding father, though he was then carrying on his work far from them. Others preferred Apollos, the minister who had been there most recently and whose intellectual ability, eloquence and knowledge of Scripture had truly wowed them all. Still others preferred looking to one of the disciples for guidance, and thought of Cephas (Peter) as their guiding light. Still others looked to Christ for guidance, but likely in a way that implied, "The rest of you don't belong to Christ at all! Just us!"

This is a negative way of using NAMES- to divide people. Paul understood how loyalties can develop among people. We are often strongly attached to a person who first introduced us to our faith, or was a positive influence in our lives. We also can find the power of a preacher so captivating that the preaching becomes more important than what is preached. We are very vulnerable to personalities.

Paul tried to address this confusion. He stressed that he hadn't baptized many people at all, and that his preaching didn't have much to do with his own eloquence or wisdom- but that Christ and the cross are the center of faith and speak for themselves.

You see, God knows our NAMES. God cherishes each one of us by NAME. We need to know that. We need to learn to trust that truth. It will change our lives!!

But, at the same time, we need to remember Philippians 2, verses 5-11:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who,*

*Though he was in the form of God,  
Did not regard equality with God  
As something to be exploited,  
But emptied himself  
Taking the form of a slave  
Being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
He humbled himself  
And became obedient to the point of death-  
Even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him  
And gave him the name  
That is above every name,  
So that at the name of Jesus  
Every knee should bend  
In heaven and on earth and under the earth  
And every tongue confess  
That Jesus Christ is Lord  
To the glory of God the Father.*

We each have a name. God knows us by name, and cherishes each one of us by name.

But we are not to become little cliques or factions around another name of any kind. We are to recognize and proclaim that ONE name is ABOVE ALL OTHER NAMES, and that is the name of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ did not push his name up high to lord it over anyone else. He carried his name to the cross, was humiliated, tortured and killed there. And by that act of love, his name was exalted and shines over everything. His name shines above all of our names, but as we turn to face him, we reflect and shine with some of his glory.

So be it. Amen.