

Pronunciation

by

The Reverend Franklyn C. Pottorff
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.

²The rich and the poor have this in common:
the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

²³for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.



James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

It's pronounced Pottorff. It's double syllabic. The two T's in the center, falling soft enough that they sound almost like D's. Making what grammarians call a tap sound. The difference can be heard when one pronounces a word as either mountain or mounTain.

But that distinction is honestly the least of my worries. Having a strange last name means you learn just how bad people are at reading and pronunciation. And with the last name of Pottorff, I've heard quite well the linguistic poverty of the masses.

A list of the greatest hits include: Putoff, Pohorf, Potiphar, Potoff, Portoff. My last name has existed in my hometown for well over a century, but it seems I stand in a long-line of folks with just enough social anxiety that we never wanted to actually correct anyone. To this day, people in my hometown pronounce my last name as Potteroff.

Still, I have never been one to waste the obliviousness of others. So when I ran for class president my senior year of high school, I knew exactly what my slogan had to be: You're Better Off with Potteroff. I won that election, by the way. Not quite *All the Way with LBJ*, but close.

Our names are important. They are a central marker of how we are known, and how we know and identify others. Frederick Buechner writes of his own strange name "if somebody mispronounces it in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that its I who am forgotten. There's something about it that embarrasses me in just the same way that there's something about me that embarrasses me."¹ Buechner's self-analysis is painfully true for some of us.

What is a name, anyway? The writer of Proverbs says in our NRSV pew Bibles, "a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches." What's worth noting is how that word functions in the Hebrew language.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, HarperOne: New York, 1993. 13.

The word we translate here as *name* is the word *Shem* in Hebrew. It's just two letters. It makes the root word for one of the most popular monikers for God in Judaism: HaShem. Means literally "The Name." God's name is *The Name*, so holy they only refer to God in a once-removed sobriquet.

Since no one can fully know God, then it is reasonable to assume that no one can fully know God's name. HaShem. Pretty beautiful when you think about it. *Shem* also functions as the root word for the Hebrew *Neshemah*, meaning breath. It's the word used when God breathes life into Adam. It's the breath of life; also translated as soul or spirit.

Even so, the actual Hebrew word *shem* is incredibly rich. Which is why it's unfortunate that English Bibles most often translate *shem* simply as the word *name*. Because the word points to something deeper, something about one's interior and exterior life.

The Common English Bible translates it a bit better in our scripture from Proverbs as the word *reputation*. "A good reputation is better than much wealth," v.1 reads in that version. Someone's name implies something about their behavior.

That makes sense when you see certain English last names. Smith, Baker, Taylor, Cook. Their name implies something about their ancestry, about what the people from whom they have descended did with their lives. And yet the word *shem* functions in an even more profound way in Scripture. To be given a name is to be placed within a heritage; and an understanding of self; but it's also to be given a future.

As the people built the Tower of Babel they said to themselves, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves..."

When Jacob wrestles at the Jabbok with the divine messenger, the angel asks him "what is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the angel said

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men have prevailed.”

The prophesied Savior, who Mary will bring into the world, is named “Emanu-El” which literally means the “With us-God.” And it’s the name he is given, Jesus, that we keep saying aloud, telling the old, old story of the With-Us God and his deep love for us.

Our names aren’t just the identifying monikers of our physical bodies. They can speak to who we are, to what we are, to who we want to be, or by whom we have been claimed. Which is why we must also acknowledge the power of renaming. When folks don’t feel entirely at home in their names, or when their lives have changed in a way that requires a new designation, then new names are offered, created, inhabited.

All of which begs the question: what does a name mean to God? What names have we been given? Or maybe a better way to ask the question is, what is the name we have been invited to live into? Our two texts this morning offer us clues. The Epistle of James says “show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Proverbs says “those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the Lord pleads their cause.”

One commentary notes here, “a truly good reputation [name] is built on consistent ethical behavior.”² And it’s worth more than great riches. To God, here in our text, our wealth doesn’t amount to much unless we are putting it to good use.

And putting to good use, means helping those who are disadvantaged by systems, policies, economics, and powers that do not see their value. For the

² *The Common English Bible Storyteller’s Bible*. Nashville: 2017., 802.

Lord pleads their cause. Our names are known to God, and made good, by our character.

That doesn't mean that God loves us any less when we are horrible, or mean, angry or vindictive, vengeful, selfish or petty. But it does mean that when God hears our name, or when others hear our name, an image comes to mind, a kind of behavioral depiction is conjured in recall. What do you think God sees when God hears your name? What do other people see when your name is spoken? And if the image is troubling to you, what are you going to do about it?

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Several weeks ago, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a story on the explosive growth of dollar stores across the U.S. With inflation going up, the cost of food prices rise as well. Couple that with job losses that are disproportionately high among low-income workers. Retail chains like Dollar General and Dollar Tree have seen a 32% increase in pedestrian traffic from pre-pandemic levels.

And with the growing footprint of these stores comes food deserts, because in a case of cruel irony, their low-cost measures put other retailers, like local grocery stores, out of business. And dollar-stores don't sell produce, or much of anything by way of food that isn't processed.

What struck me was a quote from Stacy Mitchell, co-director of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. She told the reporter, "It's a striking disparity: In this country, there is now a dollar-store land, and there is a Whole Foods land. And if you live in Whole Foods land, it's very hard for people to understand just how desperate circumstances are for the rest of the country."³

³ Bhattarai, Abha. 2021. "Squeezing more from a Dollar." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 23.

The last congregation I served was in dollar-store land. There wasn't a Whole Foods store for nearly 40 miles. Yet there are 10 Whole Foods stores within twenty miles of this church. And 29 Dollar Trees within 10 miles.

Which seems to imply we exist in both worlds, right here on Montgomery Avenue. Affluence and growing poverty on the Main Line, where only the former is assumed. We don't need to go to Appalachia to experience the creeping realities of economic injustice. It's happening right here.

And now some of you are asking, what can we do? How can we help? And I'm glad you asked. One small act could be a gift to the hunger fund. The envelopes for which are right in front of you in the pews. That money will not go to either Whole Foods or a dollar-store, but to local organizations addressing issues of food insecurity.

Yet to share our bread with the poor and not rob from them, requires us to also pay attention to the political calculus that is played on the backs of others. The policies and legislation that will harm already disadvantaged communities. The kind that furthers the gap between the haves and the have nots.

If you see something, say something. Tell our elected leaders when something is wrong, when you see injustice. Demand accountability from them. We've seen plenty of it in recent days:

Our horrendous exit from Afghanistan, leaving many to ponder our nation's oft-touted concern for human rights. Lawmakers in Texas playing politics with women's healthcare in unspeakably disgraceful ways. A slew of voting rights legislation that seems to have been written to disenfranchise people of color.

We should speak for those who have been marginalized, whose voices have been silenced. For a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.

Both the Epistle and Proverbs offer up the image of a sower as how to imagine a good name. James says, “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace, for those who make peace.” Proverbs notes “whoever sows injustice will reap calamity...” A good name is associated with good living, and good living is made by enriching the land with seeds of peace and justice. What are we sowing these days?

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Names are funny things. We stress over what to name things; our children, our pets, even our viruses. The name Frank was the 6th most popular baby name...at least it was in 1881. It currently ranks 425th. I don't know many Franks my age. But that works in my favor, because none of my loved ones have to ask “Which Frank?”

But it's not just my physical presence they think of when they say my name, they think of the things I represent, the character I embody, the wise and foolish things I've done. They remember me.

The same goes for you, and for Jesus for that matter. The name of the One who loves us from time immemorial, and who invites us to live into our names, as the Beloved ones of God.

So may we be sowers of good things in our time. Because when we are, the world won't just know how to pronounce our names, they will want to emulate them as well. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.