

"The Lord is our righteousness"
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 33:14-16
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 5:6

Wrought. Not a word that is common parlance, but elegant, nonetheless. These days its use is limited to your dismay at the major mess of things created by your child, any random governing council, or some disastrous business operation that would truly benefit from a new sign declaring it "under new management." "Look at what you hath wrought!" However, the word was once commonly used as the past participle of work. Wrought is related to the olde English word, *wryhta*, which means *worker* or *maker*. Consequently, there are many common family names that evolved from the way in which an ancestor was identified through their vocation. Cartwrights made carts. Wainwrights made wagons, and Wrights? Well, we know a couple of them made planes, and before that, bicycles.

In a similar vein, the name Smith was connected to those who worked with metal, like blacksmiths or tinsmiths. Coopers made casks, Fletchers made arrows, Chamberlains managed the chambers of royals and nobles, Wards were guards, and Websters were weavers.

Even now, names carry meaning and provide identity. Names can engender arrogance or shame. Names can confuse or isolate. Names can strike fear or perpetuate conflict. Names can provide security, connect us to our heritage, open some doors, and close others. We embrace them, deny them, run away from them, or find our ballast in them.

Names have the power to draw reactions, both positive and negative. Adams in Massachusetts, Daley in Illinois, Bush in Texas, Long in Louisiana. The same name can inspire both praise and scorn depending on the audience. A well-worn Proverb tells us, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches."

The great teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock, tells the memorable story of encountering a stranger in a restaurant one morning. However, this stranger was one of those affable fellows who never knew a stranger. He was circulating from table to table, engaging everyone in small talk, so Craddock knew the quiet breakfast he had planned was not going to turn out that way. Sure enough, very soon the gregarious gentleman was at Craddock's table asking his vocation and home. "You're a preacher? Have I got a story for you."

The stranger said, “See that mountain over there? Not far from the base of that mountain an unwed mother gave birth to a son. At age six, the mother had such a difficult time, she placed the boy in an orphanage. He had a hard life in his early years because just about every place he went, people asked the same question: ‘Young man, who’s your daddy?’ At school, the boy often hid from his fellow students during recess, and almost always sat alone while having lunch. Because ‘the question’ caused so much pain, he avoided going into local shops. Although he attended church regularly, he always arrived late and stepped out early. When he was about 12 years old, a new minister at his church gave the sermon. The benediction happened so fast that the boy got caught in the aisle and had to walk out with everyone else. When he reached the exit, the new minister, not knowing anything about the young man, put his hand on his shoulder and asked, ‘Son, who is your daddy?’

“When some members of the congregation heard the question, they became deathly quiet, knowing that the young man was embarrassed. By the sheepish looks on the faces of those within earshot, the minister realized his mistake and, using discernment that only the

Holy Spirit could provide, quickly recovered... ‘Wait a minute! I see the family resemblance. You are a child of God.’ With that he placed his hand on the shoulder of the young man and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.’

“That young man was never the same again,” the stranger continued. Whenever anybody asked him, ‘Who’s your daddy,’ he’d answer, ‘I’m a Child of God.’ ... “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I was one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything!” When Craddock later asked the waitress who that man was, she said, "Everybody around here knows that man. He lives just down the road. That’s Ben Hooper, the former governor of Tennessee!”

To be named, claimed, and known means everything. We live in an age of anxiety with so much pain festering under the skin in which we just can't seem to find a home. Our lives so often, as the folksinger says, don't match the magazine model in the way that we think they should. And so, we are always striving to be noticed. It's not just a question of if we are known but how we are known and where we are known. Ironically, it seems that the goal of celebrity, once achieved,

only inflates the crisis as image and ego wrestle with insecurity and fear. When the reality sets in that life as the magazine model isn't all it's cracked up to be, the questions loom even larger. Does anyone really know you, claim you, understand the you inside the skin that wears the name with the fame?

Who are you? We tend to work a lifetime trying to find the answer to that question though we've had it all along. You are God's own, a child of God, and even if everything is lost, that cannot be taken away from you. You can always find a peace in the embrace of that name.

The people of Jerusalem and Judah needed to hear that promise again, for their whole world was being dislocated. Our text today is from Jeremiah, and if Jeremiah was on Linked In or Zip Recruiter, he'd be pulling out his phone and hitting refresh every fifteen 15 minutes. Don't ask Jeremiah how things are going at work, because he'd be ranting like Lewis Black, fingers flying, spittle launching from his lips, his voice hoarse from caterwauling. "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me."

Job satisfaction for Jeremiah was an oxymoron. You see, Jeremiah had failed to read the fine print on his contract. Prophet initially sounded like a stellar gig replete with gravitas and respectability. However, the division to which Jeremiah was assigned offered the exact opposite. It was his unenviable task to lambast the kings, the nobles, and the powerful for their transgressions of which there were a multitude.

On the list of things Israel did well after Solomon, selecting kings was not among them. A common theme in the Bible's introduction of the kings of Israel and Judah was: "He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just like all of his ancestors." So, Jeremiah was sent to the halls of power to condemn the nation's misdeeds and warn them of the consequences that would inevitably follow. Basically, every morning Jeremiah would put on his shabby chic prophet uniform and go deliver bad news to powerful people in no mood to hear it. This goes on for some twenty-five chapters. And believe me, the job didn't get any more fun when Jeremiah's prophecy was evolving into reality. After all, the collapse and destruction of his homeland wouldn't exactly leave him unscathed.

Jerusalem crumbled, its movers and shakers were moved and shaken right into exile in far-away Babylon. The people despaired, the nation burned, the Temple was razed. Reinhold Niebuhr said that despair was typically associated with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of life. He suggested that despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God's promised future. Israel's identity had been centered on their name which had signified the covenant promise of God to them. What meaning did their name have now? Regret? Guilt? Humiliation? Loss?

But even though Jeremiah had reason to go all schadenfreude on them, the Lord gave him a new assignment to bring a word of hope to a people now despairing of their future. Chapters 30-33 are often called the Little Book of Comfort. Given their circumstances, the cynic might just call it Little Comfort, but though the word Jeremiah preached would be short in length, it would, nevertheless, be transformative, world-rocking, and hope producing for generations to come, particularly

as Christians saw that covenant promise realized in the advent of Christ.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness'."

Justice and righteousness in a land once forsaken but now claimed and identified by a new name: "The Lord is our righteousness." Thus, just to utter the name of their home would be to confess their faith in the God who was faithful to the Sinai covenant no matter what, a truth amplified when Timothy sees the covenant ultimately fulfilled in Jesus: "If we are faithless - he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself."

Granted, when asked where you live (which is one of the ways we identify ourselves), if you answer, saying, "The Lord is our righteousness;" you may raise a few eyebrows. But consider what you

are saying. It's not arrogance, it's the opposite, for it's not your righteousness that gives you a home that will not fall; it's the Lord's. Righteousness is never our achievement, but always God's grace. Righteousness, basically, is fulfilling the demands of a relationship, and in acknowledging that **the Lord** is our righteousness, we're confessing that our relationships tend to be a mess without our Lord in the middle of them. Where'er there is health in relationship, it is not our achievement, but is rather the self-giving love revealed in Christ at work in us. It is not a reason for pride but a call to gratitude. In Titus, it is written, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

Theologian Karl Barth said, "In the Gospel is revealed the great, universal secret of the righteousness of God which presses upon every [person] of every rank. In Christ the consistency of God with Himself—so grievously questioned throughout the whole world ... is brought to light and honored." In Jesus' advent, birth, life, death, and resurrection, God sends us change of address cards. Where do you live? "The Lord is our righteousness." It's a way of confessing you are a mess,

yet through the grace of our Lord, you have a name (child of God), you have a home (the Lord is our righteousness) and you have hope (because God's faithfulness and Christ's life witness provide you a way through this world).

Hey, I'm a mess, a muddle, and it's a wonder if I make it through a day without some sort of unwelcome pie in my face. And I have family and staff here who have a wealth of stories to prove it, but they will also tell you that if I got one thing right, it was a marriage proposal some 33 years ago. I definitely grabbed the better part of that deal, but you all know that by now.

Well, last week Donna and I had the chance to travel to New York City, country bumpkins in the Big Apple. We like to go up there every couple of years to hear some great jazz, catch a show or two on Broadway, and do some serious urban hiking, often totaling 6 to 9 miles a day. This year we even made it to the Metropolitan Opera. Ain't we cultured? Yet, for me the best highlight of the trip wasn't the city lights or the culture, but something Donna said as we finished our trip, dragging our luggage 22 blocks to Penn Station on a Sunday morning. Why? Because it was 22 blocks, and we were cocky. Why take the

subway when we have these comfortable shoes? We made it with plenty of time to spare, but maybe our shoulders did hurt a bit, and our muscles were a tad sore from all that hiking. Yet, Donna turned to me and said, "You know what I'm very thankful for? That even when we're truly tired, we still treat each other well."

I think that's about the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. But this I know, I can't take credit for it, for if the Lord is our righteousness, this Lord is relentlessly at work, reminding us that we have an address, equipping us to live toward goodness, enabling us to love well, allowing us to trust the future with hope. The Lord is our righteousness. Amen.