

All Things Hold
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Have you heard the saying that folks who are well loved are called by many names? Is that true in your family, or circles of friends? I can certainly witness to this in my own life. Before my son Sam was even born he had some nicknames. They were mostly diminutives like “little one,” or “bug,” or just “baby.” On the day of his birth there were powerful lightning storms that troubled the electrical power at the birthing center where he was making his debut. As you might already know, the Greek sky-god Zeus had a habit of hurling lightning bolts to display his negative opinion of things. So on that day I also called Sam “Zagreus,” which was a name that Zeus had as a child. And many names have followed him Sam into his teens.

Abbey got her share of nicknames along the way, too. “Bean” was her first nickname as I remember because she was so little when growing in the womb. She has also been called “Abbitude,” “Chickadee,” and “Abigela.” The last one was due to a misspelling she once made of her name. And we continue to craft nicknames for her as we grow up together.

Sam and Abbey have both returned the favor of nicknaming plentifully. I have been called “Fashah,” “Essay Padre,” “Pappy,” and a whole variety of things which we can’t say in church... And, of course, Carol and I have some nicknames we call each other, the first two of which were “Booger,” and “Baloney.” Can you guess who was who?

Are there any favored nicknames that you have for your loved one which you would like to share with the congregation now? Or, better yet, any nicknames you have been called which you favor?

(Reply and respond)

The point of all these ways of naming one another is to say something about us that our proper names don’t, to add some depth to the ways we relate to one another, and to convey affection of some sort or another.

Jesus, which is an anglicized version of Yeshua, is sometimes also rendered as Joshua. And the name in all those forms means something like “God is salvation,” or “God saves.” Christ, which is a Greek word for Messiah is usually rendered as “anointed one.” I sometimes think of it as “oily guy,” since anointing was done in oil traditionally. So, Jesus Christ means “God saves, anointed one,” or better still—“Anointed one of God’s salvation.” That tells us quite a bit about who Jesus is and what he does, but even more is revealed from the names given to, or implied about, Jesus in this morning’s reading.

The letter to the Colossians tells us that Christ is “the image of the invisible God,” and “the firstborn of all creation.”¹ So we could nickname Jesus as “God’s Image,” or “Before All.” We are also told that in Jesus “all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”² So, we could even call Jesus “Source of Creation,” or even “Purpose of Creation,” since we hear that everything was created *for* Jesus. He is also called the “head of the church,”³ something that we affirm in the United Church of Christ, along with many other Christian bodies.

The final verses of today’s reading also depict Jesus as the dwelling place of the fullness of God, the vehicle of reconciliation between God and a fallen humanity, and a bringer of peace. Each of those names tells us something more about his relationship to us and how he serves and embodies God in our lives now, as well as in ancient history.

This variety of ways to name Jesus reminds us of his many roles, and also point to an important consideration for our lives here and now. We are just under a week from the busiest day of the Christmas shopping season. Our already long “to do” lists seem to inevitably get even longer this time of year. We might be collecting presents, or attending parties or special events, making peace in troubled families or just dealing with all the chaos that surrounds other people who are caught up in all that crazy busy stuff. And today’s reading comes as a reminder that it is *in Jesus* that “all things hold together.”⁴ It is more than passingly ironic that in anticipating the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we spend so much time and energy holding on to other concerns. So much time shopping, or fretting, mending fences or simply getting crazy, crazy busy. I don’t believe that is Christ’s plan for us.

Now, of course, these many names of Jesus demonstrate just how complex Jesus is and how many ways there are to know him. Yet my favorite understanding of Jesus is as a person who somehow manages to participate in God’s nature fully while also being fully human. *Not* because Christ has obtained something we cannot—his full humanity speaks against that—but indeed, because Christ invites us to follow him and to abide with him in God’s nature. And that means less mindless busy work; and less stress; and more love and peace and joy.

These many names for Jesus in this morning’s text also evoke another name—a name which occurs repeatedly throughout the gospel of John, and is implied here. That name is Logos. It is

¹ Colossians 1:15.

² *Ibid*, 1:16.

³ *Ibid*, 1: 18.

⁴ *Ibid*, 1:17.

usually translated as “Word,” as in the opening verses of John’s Gospel—“In the beginning was *the Word*, and the Word *was with* God, and the Word *was* God...”⁵ But the ancient Greek “logos” means more than just “word.” The most compelling definition for it I have heard came from my friend Chris Waldron. Chris says that the best way to understand “logos” is as “underlying pattern,” which could also be rendered as “the way of things.” That would transform the opening verse from John’s gospel into *In the beginning was the underlying pattern, and the underlying pattern was with God, and the underlying pattern was God. Or, In the beginning was the way, and the way was with God, and the way was God.* Jesus calls himself the Way during the farewell discourses in John’s gospel⁶, and is popularly referred to as the Way throughout modern Christian tradition. It is no coincidence that the earliest Christians were referred to as “followers of the way.”

This notion of Jesus as the way makes a major connection with another world faith: Taoism. Tao also means “the way.” Imagine with me that these slightly altered Taoist texts speak of *our way*, Jesus Christ:

Open yourself to the way,
then trust your natural responses;
and everything will fall into place.⁷

Immersed in the wonder of the way,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready.⁸

Essentially, I think this is what the reading from Colossians is saying—keep Jesus in the middle of your life. Make sure that Christ is the pattern, or way of things, and hold on to his peace and salvation. Don’t grab on to the distractions of the world and our endless “to do” lists—or, God forbid, even more serious life struggles! Remember God is with you! Remember God saves! Remember that a more abundant life can come from taking a minute to breathe and be still and commune with God.

This is a word we need to hear as we are preparing to bake hundreds of brownies. This is a word we need to hear as we prepare for big family events—with all their potential surprises. This is a word we need to hear as we hide and wrap and open presents, or struggle with the larger concerns of life which holidays invariably inflate.

⁵ John 1:1.

⁶ John 14:6.

⁷ Ibid, Chapter 23.

⁸ —Tao Te Ching, Selections from chapters 14 and 16, from a translation by S. Mitchell.

Whenever we get muddled in the extra-busyness that any time of life brings, we need to remember that all things hold together in Jesus. All things hold together in that way, which is the way of Jesus Christ, who is our anointed one of God's Salvation, God's Image, before all, the source and purpose of creation, the head of the church, the dwelling place of God's fullness, our reconciler with God, and perhaps most importantly, our bringer of peace.

Hold on to *that* in the days ahead.

Amen.

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully

12giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.