

The 3 R's: Renamed
Matthew 16:13-20
Sunday, August 19, 2026

When I was a kid, traveling with my parents on vacation every summer, I always loved going to the truck stops, especially when they had those little carousels with keychains that had names and their meanings on them. I was always so excited to look for my name. You would be surprised how few times I actually found it on one of those little carousels, so I was often disappointed. Not finding my name made me feel isolated rather than unique. I think these moments growing up deepened the sense of unease I already felt growing up in a small West Texas town as a boy who liked music, reading, and bird watching a lot more than he liked football, fighting, or hunting. (Not that football or hunting are bad if you like those things; they just weren't me.) I felt so out of sorts that eventually I asked my dad if I could change my name. I frequently read a comic-book Bible (another weird thing to my peers) and I loved the Apostle John, so I wanted to be named after him. My dad's response to this was interesting. He told me that I could not do that, and when I asked him why, he said that he did not want a son named after something bad. Of course, I questioned this further because I was not one to just take no for an answer, and I asked what was so bad about the name John. He told me, "I don't want a son named after a toilet." So, that's why I've been stuck with "Paul."

Many of you may not know that Paul is not my first name; it is my middle name. My first name is Nolan, which is my father's name. My mother is named Paula, so it only makes sense I would be born Nolan Paul. My parents were both prominent in the community; my mom was a teacher, and my dad was the school's maintenance man, so many of my peers knew them. As I got older, I really wanted to differentiate myself from them in our community. I was super

excited when I joined the middle school basketball team, and nicknames started getting handed out. I figured that getting a cool nickname would be a good way to be my own person instead of just "Paula Corder's son." At the time, I wore goggles over my contacts to keep them from getting knocked out, much like Kareem Abdul Jabbar wore in the NBA. With these cool goggles, I thought a good nickname for me would be "Spidey" because I loved Spider-Man. I found out quickly that you can't lobby for your own nickname. One of my very creative teammates decided my nickname should be "Polyester." Another equally creative teammate decided this nickname wasn't enough and that the best nickname for me would be "Nylon Polyester Corduroy." Aren't kids fun? Weirdly enough, this eventually got shortened to simply "Roy." We already had someone on our team named Roy Abalos. He became Abalos, and I got stuck with Roy. "Roy" is not as cool as "Spidey!" Sigh... I had a complicated relationship with my name growing up.

Maybe some of you have felt discomfort with your name, if not your actual name, with the names your family of birth or the environment you grew up in gave you. Perhaps you were told you weren't good enough, smart enough, athletic enough, or pretty enough; maybe you were told you were weird because you liked things others couldn't understand. Names like "troublemaker," "dumb," "slow," "ugly," or "weird" were used to describe you. You were told that being different wasn't a good thing but a bad one. Sometimes we carry those names into adulthood and use them to berate ourselves; we believe that all the names given to us really are true.

Our experiences in school or at work can also saddle us with names we do not want. Living in a competitive world can make us feel less than. We can continue to carry the burden of

believing we are not smart enough, attractive enough, or valuable enough to compete with the "top people." Maybe we've been told we're stupid, messy, emotional, or too much to handle. Maybe an embarrassing moment that caught us off guard has followed us for our entire lives, or an issue at work we did not handle well haunts us. And when we hear the names given to us by our peers or society, they bring shame and discomfort. I once took a management course where the instructor told us the last thing we should ever do to someone is label them with a single word, like "lazy," "stupid," or "worthless," because once we have boiled someone down to just one word, we have ceased to view them as a complete human. I would guess that most of us have been subject to such de-humanizing. Such naming can cause immense suffering to our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

I'm sure Simon sometimes wished he had not been born a poor Jew living under Roman occupation. The presence of Roman soldiers and government officials would continually remind Simon that he was considered less because of his ethnic background. He gained no power or influence from his occupation, either. He was a fisherman, not born into the upper class with power and money. He followed a Rabbi who was constantly berated by the religious establishment, and his disciples faced questioning and persecution for following him. To be called a "Jesus follower" would not have been a name that brought Simon safety and joy. Simon's name is not a good name for a bold, influential man. Simon means "he who listens." Perhaps this is why Simon is portrayed in the Gospels as someone quick to speak. The "one who listens" needed to prove that he had something to say.

So, it is odd in this story that Simon behaves out of character and speaks after the other disciples have had their say. In response to Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon

reveals that he has been listening to God, and God has revealed to him who Jesus really is. In response, Jesus gives him a new name, "The Rock." No longer just a passive listener, he becomes the one of steady strength upon whom Jesus can build something special. If you read Acts, you will see that Peter indeed lives into the meaning of his name. His steadfastness and strength grew the church and gave it the start it needed to be what it is today. In his confession of Christ, millions of believers have found a solid ground, a rock on which to stand.

When we encounter Christ, give up ourselves through repentance, are released from our past, and are set free to live as we should, God changes us. We are given a new name. We are no longer defined by our family of origin, our background, our peers, our work, our accomplishments, or our failures. We are defined by the God who loves us so and gives us a new name as restored and redeemed children of God. This new name can be a solid ground for our identity because the love of God never fails. It is always there for us because we serve a God of infinite love and infinite grace. For the rest of our lives, we are called to live out that new name in cooperation with God's Spirit working in and through us.

Perhaps you feel you have not lived up to this new name. You're in good company! Peter did not always live up to his new name. Immediately after this story, Jesus calls him "Satan" for focusing too much on human goals rather than on God's. Peter later denied Jesus, not once but three times. Yet the good news for Peter was that Jesus always restores and forgives. The same good news is for us today. No matter how often we fail, Jesus forgives, calls us back to the path of renewal, and gives us the strength to carry on. This is not just the good news but the best news. Let's share it! Amen.