

The First Baptist Church, Midland
Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23
January 10, 2010

The Value of a Good Name
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Integrity and Character

Sister Mary Ann worked for a Catholic home health care agency and was out making her rounds visiting homebound patients one day not too long ago. Unfortunately, she ran out of gas but the good news is she was able to coast her car to within a couple hundred feet of the Shell station over there at the corner of Eastman and Wackerly. She walked into the little store they have there and tried to borrow a gas can but the attendant told her that the only can he had was already out on loan but if she wanted to wait a few minutes it would be returned.

Well, Sister Mary Anne was in a bit of a rush so she went back to her car to see if there was anything she could use to give her enough gas to limp into the station. Luckily, she found a bedpan in the trunk that she had forgotten about. So, with bedpan in hand she returned to the Shell to fill it up with gas. Then she carefully returned to her car to complete the transfer.

Now it happens that Rich and David were walking by just as she was pouring the contents of the bedpan into the tank on her car. They were amazed as you might imagine. In fact, they watched for a couple moments before Rich, who was so impressed, turned to David and said, "If that car starts, I'm turning Catholic!"

Appearances can be deceiving sometimes, can't they. Things aren't always what they seem. Take another example... only this time it's not humorous. And it demands a question. How many of you know what great sporting event is taking place this weekend?

The NFL football playoffs are starting, right? Well, that's correct but it's not the one I'm thinking about. No, I'm talking about the game that some folks consider to be about as exciting as watching paint dry... I'm talking about professional golf.

Did you know the new PGA season started this weekend? That's right... those poor guys are having to hoof it around a golf course somewhere over in Hawaii. Tough duty, don't you think? But here's what I've found fascinating. In leading up to this event, I haven't heard one announcer or sportscaster talk about this competition without mentioning the fact that Tiger Woods would not be playing. The emphasis hasn't been upon the incredible athletes who are there... it's been upon the one who isn't. And they always go on to lament his fall from grace.

The truth is, the Tiger Woods story is tragic. Here is a man who had it all. His name was synonymous with success. Has anyone ever captured or dominated a sport the way he has? He's bigger than the game itself. As a result, Tiger is the first professional athlete to become a billionaire off of his sport. He has a beautiful family and absolutely anything and everything money can buy. His several multi-million dollar homes are accented nicely by his 200 foot yacht and his private jet. Sponsors were lined up to have him advertise their products and were willing

to pay millions of dollars to capture his endorsement. In the eyes of so many, he was squeaky clean and his name was more than respected. It was revered.

But then we learned that Tiger is not the person he wanted us to think he was. His sexual indiscretion and promiscuity brought his empire down. Not only did he betray his wife but he cheated on his children and deceived his admiring throngs. The name once synonymous with success is now a symbol of disloyalty. *What's in a name?* we may wonder. More than one can imagine.

Consider another example from the same world of golf. Before there was Tiger Woods, there was a guy named Arnold Palmer. It is Palmer who is credited with bringing golf into America's living rooms by way of television in the early 60's. But listen to the difference between these two men.

One day a sportswriter was invited for dinner at Palmer's residence. He arrived a bit early and Mrs. Palmer met him, invited him in and said her husband would be down in a moment. The writer asked if, while he was waiting, he could see Palmer's trophy room. She replied, "Oh, we don't have such a room."

This was incredibly intriguing to the writer so later that night he asked Arnold, who had more than 60 tour victories, why he didn't have his trophies on display.

Palmer looked the columnist right in the eye and replied, "For what? That's yesterday's news!" Then Palmer explained: "I have enjoyed every victory and cherished the memories. I have celebrated those tournaments. But come Monday morning of the next week, I'm no different from the man who missed the cut last week... There will be a day when I can take the time to look back. But as long as I want to stay competitive, I must never stop and marvel at what I have accomplished, only look forward to the next challenge at hand."

There are few who are more esteemed in the world of sport than Arnold Palmer. Simply name the name and people are filled with admiration because this name immediately brings high regard and respect. The man had character. Again I ask... *What's in a name?*

Let's think about that and toward that end, I invite you to consider the wisdom found in the book of Proverbs. It's important to understand that this book is simply a collection of wise sayings most of which are attributed to King Solomon who was the son of David. There isn't a sequential story to be followed as is most often the case in scripture. Rather, these are pithy sayings born out of human experience that have stood the test of time. If one is going to live a Godly life, these are simple suggestions to be embraced toward that end. That's why this is called wisdom literature... it depicts a wise – and we believe – a faithful way to be spiritually grounded.

In the reading I chose for this morning, there are three main points or lessons to be considered. The first has to do with the value of a good name. Solomon says, "**A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.**" (22:1) The value of a "good name" in ancient Israel cannot be overestimated. In fact, as we look to wisdom

literature in general, we see this as an important theme. Another great example is found in Ecclesiastes when it says, **“a good name is better than precious ointment.”** (7:1) Now exactly what are the writers saying?

Of course the “good name” to which they are referring has nothing to do with one’s actual name. Rather, these writers are talking about a person’s character. It has to do with the way we live from day to day. It has to do with reputation and standing in the community. And most of all, it has to do with integrity.

Obviously, this is not something that just happens. It comes only with a lot of hard, patient and intentional living. Hence, a good name is something to be highly valued. A person can have everything in the world, but if their name is destroyed their well being may be irreparably damaged. And as we have seen with Tiger Woods, in our culture and in our day it can happen over night. As one scholar has written, “widespread acceptance among one’s contemporaries was a matter in which to take pride in the world of Proverbs.” (Homiletics, September 7, 2003, And we can say the same today, can’t we? Indeed, a good name is to be treasured.

Then there is a second point. Simply stated, we destroy a good name by living as if no one else matters (“Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity”), and we achieve a good name by sharing with others (“Those who are generous are blessed for they share their bread with the poor”). This isn’t brain surgery, is it? It’s common sense. When we treat others with respect and generosity, our integrity shows through. But when we take advantage of or use others, our evil side surfaces and our “good name” is destroyed.

Think about another example... Bernie Madoff. A person can’t spend the amount of money Madoff “made off” with. But he did it by lying and cheating and when the truth surfaced, not only was his reputation destroyed but his life was shattered. He’s going to spend the rest of his days behind bars... all because he compromised his character and integrity in a selfish and evil scheme to accumulate personal wealth. He was a rich man already but was driven to be richer. And sadly, he didn’t care who he hurt along the way. His name will forever be connected to the world of corruption. He’ll be remembered as the man who brought the “Ponzi Scheme” (another name, by the way, forever connected with duplicity) to a whole new level.

Finally, there is a third point to be made. As we strive to build character and integrity leading to a good name, we must be intentional about respecting others. In this third couplet from the wisdom of Solomon, this comes clear. When Solomon references robbing the poor or crushing the afflicted at the gate, he’s talking about social justice. In his day, the wisdom of the community was meted out at the gate. It was the gathering place for the elders and when there were issues to be resolved, it was to their wisdom that the people would turn. It was their version of the people’s court. False accusations, taking advantage of others, treating folks unkindly or disrespectfully, violations of the law... these were the kinds of issues that were addressed, and these elders who were given authority by their respective communities would strive to protect the innocent and defend the helpless. They were people with a good name who had been granted the trust of their peers. And they used that trust to make their world a gentler and kinder place.

In our day, I think of a man named Jim Wallis who has earned his good name. He is a Christian prophet in the sense that he is constantly calling people of faith to better understand the issues of social justice. He is intentional about respecting others, especially those who are marginalized by our society. He works hard through his organization called *Sojourners* to care for the less fortunate while calling our societal structures to accountability. And he is a humble man. In other words, Jim Wallis characterizes what we're talking about. He is a man with a good name.

As I think about what we've been considering, I am reminded of one who came long after King Solomon and who also had a formula for valuing a good name. His name was Jesus and his blueprint for success is captured in the great commandment. I truly believe that if we take seriously our call to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind and soul, and if we pay acute attention to our call to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we will be people of integrity and character and when folks hear our names they will be respectful of our humble efforts to make this world a better place. And that, when you come right down to it, is what having a good name is all about, don't you think?

Let me close by sharing the experience of a Texas rancher who wanted to have a gigantic ranch. So, he bought 10 large pieces of property from his neighbors and put them together to form one giant spread. His friend asked him the name of his new mega-ranch. He replied, "It's called The Circle Q, Rambling Brook, Double Bar, Broken Circle, Crooked Creek, Golden Horseshoe, Lazy B, Bent Arrow, Sleepy T, Triple O Ranch."

"Wow," said his friend, "I bet you have a lot of cattle."

"Not really," explained the rancher. "Not many survive the branding."

As we make our way through life, how are we going to be branded? This is the question every person must answer. Will my name bring delight and high regard when mentioned to others, or will it breed a sense of contempt and disrespect? How will I be branded? Always remember, *a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches...* So it has been and so shall it always be.

Amen and AMEN!