

**\*\*Homily, 6th Sunday of Easter—What’s in a name?** If we were asked that question directly—right now—we might think for a few seconds—and then answer: “Well, it’s an identity.” And the person asking us the question— thinking a little more deeply—might say: “Sure, you know, a person’s name, it really just sums us up. It’s like a capsule version of ourselves. And, if you know the other person you’re calling by name—if you know them even just a little—their name can conjure up their personality. It can hint at their talents—it can suggest their problems—maybe even imply their possibilities and potential for change.

“In short, a name can capture the essence of who each one of us is.”

And that’s so true in the Bible where a name is often a hot-air balloon to a big landscape of promise and insight and breakthrough inspiration for us—now—and anytime.

So, what’s our hot-air balloon name for today? Well, it’s...Philip. So, did you take in that name during our first Scripture reading today? We actually heard it twice. And our Scripture writer uses it to build some drama. I mean, listen! Here’s how that Scripture goes:

“Now, Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed Jesus the Messiah to them. With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs and cures he was doing. As a result, there was great joy in that city.”

So, this Philip. He must have been a great guy, right? I mean, the Scripture says: People pay attention to him. And he’s preaching God’s supernatural love for people through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

He’s working cures on sick and challenged people. He’s creating JOY in this large city of Samaria.

Okay, so, this Philip. Clearly, he must have been a star—even a charismatic. But who was he? Who was he really? Well, today’s Scripture doesn’t say. It just says, “Philip.” Well, there’s Philip the Apostle, and that connection would make sense because, after all, Philip the Apostle is mentioned in three of the Gospels, AND also Acts. But...no, it’s not him. We know it’s not because later in the Book of Acts, he is identified fully.

This Philip we’re talking about today is actually, Philip...the Deacon.

All right, but ho-hum, you may say, and I would get that! Why would the identity of this particular Philip be so important to us today? Well, aside from the fact it’s worthwhile to know the details of a Bible account to understand its depth and meaning, the identity of this Philip the Deacon now can give us an understanding that could lead to inspiration and even to a stronger Catholic identity for us.

Here’s what I mean. In last week’s Scriptures, we also heard from Acts of the Apostles, and, during the Easter Season, we always hear from that New Testament book— whose shorter name is simply...Acts. Acts tells us the story of the early Church.

Among other things, it describes Jesus parting from his Apostles and ascending to heaven and leaving his Spirit with them, so they can carry on his work and mission.

But soon after Jesus ascends to heaven, the Apostles realize they cannot carry on by themselves, so, last week, the Acts passage we heard in Mass said the Apostles identify and call forth deacons by name. In fact, they call seven of them, including Stephen, who becomes the first Christian martyr, and also this Philip, the one we’re talking about today. And that phrase we just heard—“And the Apostles realize they can’t carry on by themselves”—that phrase is key for us as Christians. None of us can carry on by ourselves.

Or, maybe better put: None of us can carry on WELL by ourselves. We need to do things together, and when we do them that way, then there can be hope. Then, there can even be...joy.

So, the deacons were there from the beginning—right from the very first days of the Church. In fact, their whole being is Scripture-based and ancient and ordained and completely directed to being helpful to others. In fact, that deacon helpfulness is at the heart of deacon formation and purpose. As priests are conformed to Jesus the High Priest, so deacons are conformed to Jesus the Servant, as one who serves others, demonstrated by Jesus himself when he gets down on his knees and washes the feet of his Apostles at the Last Supper.

So, deacons exist to serve, as Philip does when he goes to Samaria and preaches and baptizes people and stirs up the joy. So, deacons are here to call people together to help one another, maybe especially to help one another get to heaven.

But what happens to later generations of deacons after those first seven are called and those first seven start demonstrating Jesus' servanthood and calling people to serve one another?

Well, for about 1,000 years of Church history, deacons are actively doing their ministries. But by about 1,000 A.D., there are so many priests and nuns fulfilling deacon functions, the need for deacons eventually fades.

So, almost another thousand years go by, and the pope calls the Vatican Council together in the 1960s, and the Council decides to restore many Apostolic practices, and they restore deacons to get the full expression of Jesus that includes Jesus the Servant.

So, for more than 50 years now, deacons have been back, and their numbers have grown from about 300 in the United States in 1973, the first year of modern-day deacon ordinations, to nearly 20,000 American deacons today, including more than 170 in our Green Bay Diocese. And one of their symbols is a water pitcher, a water basin, and a cloth towel, all representing the servant GEAR of Jesus the Servant, the foot-washer serving his Apostle friends.

So, what's in a name? Well, quite a lot, right?

For Philip the Deacon, it's being identified and called forth to serve because none of us can carry on WELL in this life alone. For Philip the Deacon, it's the living out of servanthood.

And for us today, it's part of our name, too—that last part anyway—that deacon part because that is at the heart of who we are as Christians. We serve one another and the world. So, at St. Mary Mag., it's Emma the Deacon—and Richard the Deacon—Shelly the Deacon—and Jeff the Deacon. We're all deacons here.

So, say your first name and then add that deacon part, and then know...that in serving others—in helping others—in caring for others—in treasuring others—in seeing Jesus in others—each of us just might discover more joy—and live it more fully. And we can imagine that Joy Man, Philip the Deacon, would surely go for that!

Please, everyone, give it some thought...