What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;

Thus waxes Juliet as she stands on her balcony, unaware of her beloved Romeo below. They are separated, alienated, by a name. Romeo is a Montague and Juliet a Capulet, two families that intensely hate one another. In spite of their great love it is only the names, Montague and Capulet, that stand as an impenetrable barrier between them. Juliet is right. It is not the name she loves, but the man. And it is a great injustice that the whole of Romeo – his wit, his passion, his strength, his mind – is reduced to 8 little hate-filled letters: M-O-N-T-A-G-U-E. Of course Shakespeare is pointing to a great irony: a name cannot capture the whole of an object or a person, and yet a name is extraordinarily important. What IS in a name?

As is the case for most if not all of the Middle East soccer is THE national sport of Libya. Libyans are fanatics for “football.” However, during most of the tyrannical reign of now deposed and deceased Muammar Gaddafi soccer players’ names were never ever mentioned during radio and television broadcasts. If you were to listen a play-by-play announcer of a game during Gaddafi’s rule it would sound something like this: “Number 8 has the ball… he dribbles it forward… he passes back to number 13 who passes it on to 7… oh, the defender is down… number 7 shoots…. GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOALLLLLLLLL!” Nobody had a name. Now imagine if you had been listening to Libyan soccer for years and years, wondering about number 7… who is he? Is he tall? Would I know him if I saw him on the street? The answer, of course, is no. Because of soccer’s immense popularity Gaddafi did not allow the players to be named in public. He could not have anyone more popular than he, anyone more well-known, anyone more powerful. And so he stripped the soccer players of any power or identity by taking away their names. They were just numbers.

This gives us a glimpse into exactly “What IS in a name?” Our names identify us. Our names convey to another person who we are. When we are introduced to a stranger – say it is a new neighbor – the first thing we want to know is his or her name. As we get to know that individual we begin to associate “who that person is” – their history, their sense of humor (or lack thereof), their gifts, their peculiarities – with their name. When we hear that name along comes all of that information. Let’s say one of you comes up to me between the services and says, “Jean needs to see you.” Well, I am in a bit of a quandary. We have four folks with that name… If I were to ask, “Which Jean?” you might say, “Oh, well, I don’t know her last name, but she is about yea tall with such-and-such color hair…” “Aaahhh, THAT Jean,” I might say, and all I know of that Jean opens before me like French doors onto a veranda. I may even know why she is looking for me. Names in this sense then are not our identity, but they identify us.
The other aspect that Gaddafi’s no-soccer-name policy lifts up is that there is power in a name. There is power in being known. Notoriety, fame, esteem, attention, come with others knowing our name. This is a power for which we humans seem to yearn. Myopic blogs and hundreds of Facebook friends and tweets about the mundane are simply contemporary manifestations of this deep-set desire for the power to be known. And the link, of course, is our name.

And so names as we typically experience them serve to identify, draw notoriety, and at times separate. This morning we celebrate a different understanding of names and naming: we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name, the occasion of Jesus’ naming and dedication as a newborn. We pick up the story in the gospel of Luke where we left off on Christmas a week ago. The shepherds have come and seen the babe about whom the angels and archangels have sung. These shepherds have gone forth as the first evangelists, spreading the Good News of great joy: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And now, in accordance with the law Mary and Joseph bring their eight-day-old son to be circumcised and dedicated to God. That was what one did – dedicate the first-born to God. The child born of Mary is given a name, and which is an interesting development. If you recall when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt Moses asked God what God should be called. And God says, “I AM”. “I am who I am.” The tetragrammaton. YHWH. Pious Jews for millennia have refrained from saying the name of God. In the Jewish tradition, to say the name of someone is to possess them, in a sense. And God is The Almighty, the “unpossessable,” the source of all that is. One does not possess the ineffable, and so one does not name the ineffable. And yet here we find this God incarnate being named. We are to possess him, somehow, somewhat. We are to call him Jesus, literally “He Saves.” We are to possess “savior.”

As I noted earlier the naming of Jesus is different from the naming that happens in our world. Whereas my name “Bill” is an identifier but not my identity, Jesus’ name is his identity. He is savior. And yet he is more, as we call him by many names. When we name Jesus, possess Jesus, we open French doors on the veranda of all he is: the Christ, the Messiah, Son of God, “the Word,” Wonderful Counselor, Sun of Righteousness, Prince of Peace, Bread of Life, Light of the World, Emmanuel, the Beloved. There are more. Our names for Jesus are our grasping, our desire to clutch and hold God. And in his incarnation Jesus became just that: ours to possess, somehow, somewhat.

Now you have heard me yammer on and on over the years about the relational nature of God; this whole business of naming is relational as well. It is a two-way street. We too are named by God, and in that naming we are possessed by God. If I were to baptize Joe Bob Jones right now, I would ask Joe Bob’s parents (if he were an infant) or his sponsors to name him. This is not because I have forgotten Joe Bob’s name. When you give your name in that moment you
surrender yourself to God. And the name of God is surrendered up to you: the words uttered at baptism are, “Joseph Robert Jones I baptize you in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Names are exchanged. Self-surrender is shared. Joe Bob becomes the possession of God, and God becomes the possession of Joe Bob.

Now this SHOULD give you pause. You possess Christ as Christ possesses you. What power…, right? And yet it is not the power of Muammar Gaddafi and myopic blog-sites and hate-filled families. This is the power Paul describes as we heard this morning; “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Here is the power we possess: here is the power of love. Just as the cross was not an end but a beginning, so too the power of the love we possess is one that gives so as to create new life. In our naming we become children of God, vessels to receive God’s love poured out, vessels that in turn pour out that love in our world.

What’s in a name? Well, everything. God did not create Joe Bob Jones to be “Number 7, passing the ball to number 13.” God created Joe Bob and each and every one of us to live out of the veranda of Jesus that resides within us. In that living, then, we become conveyors – “incarnators” – of all that Jesus embodies. We pour out Emmanuel, Bread of Life, Prince of Peace, Beloved, “He saves”.