

It's quite a misunderstood name that our denomination calls itself "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America". And these misunderstandings over our name have created a bit of a controversy, so much that this moniker is the topic of the most recent issue of *Living Lutheran*.

The term "evangelical" brings to mind a number of associations that most Lutherans find negative and unappealing. For many Americans, the word "evangelical" brings to mind stances that most Lutherans would find oppressive or unfamiliar, such as "legalistic theology; a literal interpretation of Scripture; dismissal of opposing viewpoints; perceived hostility toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community; [and] skepticism of science and academia."

"The baggage associated with the word 'evangelical' has led some Lutherans to distance themselves from the term. Some congregations have deemphasized evangelical in their names, dropping it from their signs and websites." Some Lutherans try to gain distance from the negative connotations through pronunciation gymnastics, going so far as to say "eh-vangelical" instead of "ee-vangelical."

The very first time I introduced myself to my husband, I took a moment to explain the name of our denomination. "We're called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," I said, "but we're actually the most theologically progressive Lutheran church around."

Since then, our national church's name has continued to confuse folks. In the fall of 2016, during the presidential election, one congregant earnestly asked me, "Pastor, are we 'Evangelicals'?" Because she heard the news talking about Evangelicals and they didn't sound like us, like Lutherans.

Yes, the name "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" can be quite negative, confusing, maybe even a little humiliating, and definitely easy to misunderstand these days.

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In our reading from the Book of Acts today, Peter finds himself in the middle of a misunderstanding over a name. The uproar is over a name that others might have *heard* about but had little understanding of its *true meaning*. A name that, for people in Peter's time, was confusing, humiliating, maybe even a little bit negative. The name was Jesus Christ.

Here's the whole story: It's after Christ's resurrection, after the ascension, and after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter and John, Jesus' disciples, are in Jerusalem hanging around the temple, where they encounter a man who has been lame from birth. This man's friends carry him to the temple every day so he can beg for a living. The man sees Peter and John and asks them for alms, and Peter says, "I don't have any change to give you, but I can give you this . . . In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

And the man does. He gets up and walks and leaps into the temple with Peter and John.

Everyone is amazed. They want to know how this happened. So, Peter explains, “By faith in (Jesus’) *name*, (this) name itself has made this man strong.”

Peter’s use of this loaded, powerful name greatly annoys the priests and Sadducees and the captain of the temple, so they have him and John arrested.

Our passage begins the next day, when the rulers, elders, and scribes hold a sort of trial for the disciples. They make them stand in their midst and inquire, “By what power *or by what name* did you do this?”

Then Peter begins their defense. “Rulers of the people and elders . . . let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health *by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.*”

In the middle of this uproar over a misunderstood name, Peter doesn’t try to explain it. He doesn’t try to deemphasize it or distance himself from it or pronounce it differently.

No, Peter highlights how Jesus’ name works in the world, citing the man’s healing to demonstrate the name’s power. Whereas I felt the need to define “evangelical,” Peter feels the need to highlight the power of Jesus’ name.

Peter proudly claims the name of Jesus of Nazareth and what it does, stating clearly, directly, boldly even, that the man is standing in good health *by the name of Jesus*.

Peter goes even further in using Jesus' name and owning its baggage when he says, "by the name of Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

Others may have shied away from the name and its association with an executed criminal. But Peter says, "*Yes, we stand here by the name of the one who was crucified, who died in the most humiliating and shameful way.*"

Some may misunderstand the name and its story of death and resurrection, but Peter doesn't seem to care. Instead, Peter claims the name of Jesus and his subsequent rejection, saying "*Yes, we stand here by the name of Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected.*"

Because for Peter and John, there was no other name under heaven that could offer the healing, transformative, life-giving power of the name of Jesus Christ, the crucified one.

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Peter's story and bold claim of Jesus' name offer us perspective on our name

as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Because like the name of Jesus Christ and how it works in Peter's story, the name "evangelical" is, at its core, about God's transformation and love.

Because "evangelical" is simply the Greek word for "good news" or "gospel." So being "evangelical" is about God's transformative love given to us in Jesus Christ, which is good news for all people. Only recently—perhaps even more recent than the formation of the ELCA—has the term taken on a polarizing meaning and a political brand in North America, new meanings and associations that don't seem to be about the Good News of God's love for all people given freely in Jesus Christ.

So, what do we do with this misunderstood name that meant something different to the people who chose it than it does to us today? Peter's experience again instructs us. Because, like Peter knew in his heart what the name of Jesus meant, and believed in and demonstrated its power to do great things, we know that at the core of the label "evangelical" is the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. At the core of the humiliating name is the love that lays down its life of its own accord. At the core of the confusing name is the truth that we are saved by grace through faith. At the core of what some hear as a negative name is God's goodness and mercy that follows us all the days of our lives.

Peter's experience instructs us about how to respond whenever the world encounters our identification with Jesus' name and misunderstands it;

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

what do to every time our culture faces God's evangelical, life-giving power and is confused about what it means. Any misunderstanding over the name opens a door for us to explain who we are and how we are claimed and defined by God's love alone. Any confusion of our identification with Jesus' name offers us a Peter-style moment to testify boldly, answer directly, claim proudly our evangelical label. We can use the questions it raises to boldly, directly, and proudly point toward the Good News of God's love for all people freely given in Jesus Christ.

Peter's experience demonstrates how we followers of Jesus will *always* encounter some confusion about our mission and the purpose of our name. But any misunderstanding, far from negative, presents the universal opportunity to boldly claim Jesus' name and, as First John exhorts us, to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

"The best way to reclaim that word," one pastor in the *Living Lutheran* article suggests, "is to literally live that way." Not only *believing* and *speaking* in the name of Jesus Christ but also *loving* one another. In a culture that loves merit and achievement, our misunderstood name invites us to speak the Good News of God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ freely given, never earned. In a world that is ready to exploit people and natural resources, our confusing religious label provides the opportunity to promote the image of God in everyone and protect the creator's handiwork everywhere. In a society that thrives on either-or, you're-in-or-you're-out polarization, our name as

evangelical Jesus-followers sets up a large table where we welcome enemies and friends to dine together.

No need to explain it. No need to shy away or disassociate from it. Instead, proudly proclaim it. Instead, live it. Instead, love one another.

That is how we can stand by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This is how we can stand by the transforming love of God. That is how we can be evangelical.

AMEN.

The *Living Lutheran* article quoted in this sermon can be found at

<http://content.digitalpub.blue-soho.com/web/y5b2/0A1qcub/LivingLutheranApri/index.html>

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