An east European newcomer to America in the 1880’s took his expectant wife to the hospital. During the delivery of twin babies, the man fainted, so his brother was asked by the authorities to name them.

“My brother named the kids,” he later moaned. “And my brother is numbskull!”

“What did he call the girl?” “He named her Denise.” “Denise? Well, that’s a pretty name. What did he name the boy?” “De Nephew!” (LA 2:3:38)

We do not choose our names. But we do choose what our names stand for.

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.

Whom do you respect and admire – and why? For sure the rich and famous, those successful in politics, those who excel in sports or entertainment, the powerful and the prominent are notorious, envied, even respected, perhaps admired. But is wealth or power or prestige or public adulation the basis for a good name? Whenever polls of the most respected men and women are conducted, those with the best names are people like Billy Graham and Pope John Paul and Jimmy Carter and Mother Theresa and Eleanor Roosevelt. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. What makes a good name?

According to Proverbs, a good name comes from doing good. “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,” Proverbs says. “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.” Jesus echoed a similar thought when he called the rich young ruler seeking the good life to “sell all you have and give it to the poor.” According to the Bible, sharing material wealth with the poor is at the heart of goodness. And these ancient words have more import TODAY than they did THEN, some three thousand years ago. For in that ancient economy, very few were rich and everybody else was poor – there essentially was no middle class at all. Even without the rising tide of our booming economy, our ships are floating pretty high in the water. And a good name is rooted in the sharing of our abundant lives with those who hunger and struggle to simply live. For all that we have comes from God’s hand: the rich and the poor have this in common Proverbs adds, and the Lord is maker of them all.

While sharing material wealth is at the heart of doing good, that is not all there is to generosity. Generosity takes many forms. Including what the Bible calls HOSPITALITY. We think of hospitality as being a good host to guests in our home. Biblical hospitality goes much deeper than good manners. Biblical hospitality is an attitude of openness and acceptance that permeates all of life. Biblical hospitality is welcoming the stranger into a new community, welcoming a stranger NOT AS A STRANGER at all, but as a friend and potential brother or sister. Biblical hospitality doesn’t ask first, “Are you a ’people like us’?” OR “Do I approve of you?” Biblical hospitality simply extends an open hand and heart and says “in the name of Jesus Christ, Welcome!” A good name arises from generous hospitality. A good name comes from doing good.
But doing good isn’t all there is to a good name. **Those with a good name are those persons whose PUBLIC and PRIVATE lives are CONGRUENT.** A person with a good name is not perfect. But a person with a good name accepts his faults and admits her sins and mistakes. A person with a good name doesn’t admit to wrongdoing only AFTER he is caught. A person with a good name is not merely sorry that a private mistake has become public; a person with a good name is sorry she made the mistake in the first place. There is an inner and outer, private and public congruence to the life of a person with a good name.

**All of which means that a person with a good name has a deep spiritual center.** A genuine humility. An authentic religious piety. As the letter of James might say, **a person with a good name shows no partiality, but respects rich and poor alike as children of God.** A person with a good name prays more in private than in public and does more good that is NOT noticed than good that IS noticed. As Jesus might have said, a person with a good name “loves the Lord her God with all her heart and mind and soul and strength, and her neighbor as herself.” A person with a good name generously shares ALL of his life, and such a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.

**But where do people with a good name come from?** Our names are given. We do not choose them. We *do choose* what to make of our names.

In this election year, the rhetoric is running hot and heavy that persons with good names arise when our elected leadership are persons with good names. In a tradition going back at least 165 years to the first McGuffey Readers, we have looked to our elected leaders and heroes and heroines as models for inspiring and instilling character and virtue in the American people. If only it were that easy!

For sure, we DO need governmental and religious and social leaders with good names. But if we want to rise up another generation of persons with good names we do not have to look to Washington. We need look no farther than down the hall to the Sunday School classroom. Or to our own homes. And our neighborhoods. We need look no farther than our friends. We need look no farther than deep within ourselves.

For men and women and boys and girls choose a good name not so much because of what some important person far away has done. A person chooses a good name because of his or her relationship with parents, with teachers, with friends and peers, and colleagues. People choose a good name because other people before them and BESIDE them choose a good name more precious than great riches, a good name more valuable than silver or gold. **Our children, our friends, and our neighbors choose a good name when WE choose a good name.**

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of those 19th century American writers who, like McGuffey and his *Reader,* often told stories with a pronounced moral twist. Among Hawthorne’s stories is *The Great Stone Face.* The story is set far up in New England, where a prominent rock outcropping overlooks a fertile valley. From the valley below the formation appears as a wise, kind, all-knowing stone face. According to the story, there was an old prophecy passed down from the Indians, that someday a child born in the valley would grow to be a great and wise man, a man of a truly good name, who would bear the exact likeness of the Great Stone Face.

One who waited most expectedly for such a great and good man was a man named Ernest. As a young boy Ernest spent hours in respectful adoration of the Great Stone Face. It gave him a sense of comfort and strength, for he saw honest, love, and justice in the face – virtues he longed to experience.

One day a wealthy businessman and native son named GATHERGOLD returned to the valley to build a summer home. The townspeople were thrilled with his homecoming, and as he rode into town, a huge crowd met him. Some proclaimed, “Look at Gathergold, he looks like the Great Stone Face!” Ernest strained, but try as he could, he saw no resemblance at all between Gathergold and his beloved Stone Face.
Time passed and people forgot about Gathergold. Ernest grew into a quiet, reflective young man.

The people’s expectations for a native son with a good name were rekindled when another son of the village returned after making his mark in a great war. Known as OLD BLOOD AND THUNDER, he rode into town on the 4th of July, astride a great white horse, to the adulation of the masses. Again could be heard the cry, “He resembles the Great Stone Face! The prophecy has been fulfilled.” As Ernest listened to Old Blood and Thunder’s speech, he said to himself, “the people’s hopes are misplaced; this is no man of peace like the Great Stone Face”.

As time passed, Ernest entered middle age. He continued his common work. He gained somewhat of a reputation in the area as a simple-hearted man of great wisdom. People sought his advice. His life-long friends began to sense that there was something special about him.

At last, another native son returned home. OLD STONY PHIZ had made his mark in politics. Again, the prophecy was cited, but again, in Ernest’ eyes, the prophecy remained unfulfilled.

At long last, Ernest was an old man, known for his wisdom and compassion. Nightly people would gather in the meadow to hear him speak. Each night he would share his hope that the prophecy of the Great Stone Face would come to pass. Each night Ernest would point to the Great Stone Face as his teacher and friend.

One day a famous poet came to town to visit. He had heard of Ernest and the wisdom of the gentle man of the valley. Unannounced he went to see Ernest. Like all strangers, he was welcomed. Ernest had read the poet’s books and respected him greatly, but he did not recognize his guest. But as they talked, the two men sensed that they shared much in common. Ernest hoped that at last the prophecy had been fulfilled in the poet.

Evening came and the poet accompanied Ernest to the meadow. Earnest began to speak. The poet glanced up at the great Stone Face and realized that the prophecy HAD been fulfilled at last. The poet stood and pointing at Ernest proclaimed, “Behold the Great Stone Face!”

The people who had known Ernest their whole lives looked at him and at the mountain and then saw him with new vision. The Great Stone Face was indeed in their midst, a man of integrity, wisdom, goodness, hospitality, and love. A man with a good name.

Friends: A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. Choose you this day what name you shall have. And by the grace of God, may you choose that good and great life more precious than rubies, more lasting than fame, and more blessed than wine. AMEN.

Proverbs 22 (selected verses)

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold.
2 The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.
8 Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.
9 Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.
22 Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate;
23 for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.
James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? 2 For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit at my feet,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? 8 You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.