

"Putting Your Name on the Line"

Isaiah 40:28-31; Luke 10:1-9, 17-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 3, 2016 – 7th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Tomorrow is Independence Day, and although not a church holiday, it is important enough in the lives of Americans that we make some note of it in our service. It's a good time to remind ourselves that if this is a country founded on Christian principles, then we need to live in such a way to reflect that heritage. Nations, as well as individuals, can easily fall away from the Lord.

July 4 has significance because of the document declaring our independence from the yoke of British rule. Interestingly, though, its 56 signers didn't do so as a group and they didn't do it on July 4. The official signing occurred on August 2, and then only 50 affixed their names; the others were added later and had to squeeze their signatures in wherever they could.

Certainly the most impressive signature is that of John Hancock. Hancock was president of the Congress and so his name appears first and is centered over the others. It was written large and with the flourish of classic penmanship. In fact, it's probably the single most recognized signature in the world and has given rise to the phrase "Put your John Hancock here" as a way of indicating the need for signing something.

The signers of the Declaration of Independence ranged in age from 26 to that of Benjamin Franklin, who was 70. The signers were farmers, doctors, merchants, shippers, lawyers, and four were ministers. All risked loss of fortune, imprisonment, and even death for treason. Still, they had the courage to sign. They willingly put their name on a document that was to change the world, and which has, as a consequence, immortalized them.

Our name is one of the most important possessions we have, yet we rarely give thought to it. From our first day when it is inscribed on our birth certificate, our name has appeared in countless places, records, and lists. Our name, ironically, will last even longer than we will.

Your name is probably on a baptismal certificate, on many school records and report cards and tests, on diplomas, on employment records and pay checks. Perhaps your name is on a letterhead, a business card, a property deed, social security card, bank checks, credit cards, and for most of you, a church membership roll.

If you've run for public office, your name has been on political announcements and posters and in the news. I still have copies of the advertisements for my one attempt at public service.

We think of names especially this weekend with its emphasis on our liberty and those who made it possible. Hancock said that he made his signature exceptionally large so that King George could read it without his spectacles. That comment reminds me of Paul, in writing to the church at Galatia, who said, "See with what large letters I am writing to you."

Our New Testament text today also makes reference to names. It tells the story of Jesus sending out seventy disciples to take his message to the surrounding countryside, seventy who were chosen to go out ahead of him and bring the message that the Kingdom of God is

at hand. They return elated, saying "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us." The power to do good in Christ's name overcame the obstacles they encountered.

They brought a message of hope to the downtrodden. They cured the ill. Now they return full of joy. Yet, Jesus says do not rejoice at this success, important as it is, but instead be glad that your names are written in heaven. God knows and remembers who you are. From what Jesus says we get the idea that this is not a page ever changing, but an entry of permanence. This is supported by the Greek text where the verb is not just the simple "grapho", write, but "engrapho", meaning to engrave.

I used to like to go down to an old cemetery near Milford Center. It was a quiet and peaceful place out there on Orchard Road, on a hillside which caught the full sun. It was a natural place with nothing of the feel of a modern cemetery laid out by some computer-drawn plan. Graves, almost all of which were old, were set out as people dug them, perhaps even the relatives of the deceased. Few burials had taken place there recently.

Here were the names of Sarah and William and Charlotte; Homer, Millicent, and baby Jessica. They were no more in body, but yet they were still here in name. As I read the engravings, deeply etched in old stone, the fact of their existence had significance again when I read them out loud: "George Allen Wainwright. Born, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, April 7, 1834. Died, June 3, 1898. Beloved husband and father."

Time has passed, more than a century, but George—the child, the teen, the newlywed, proud father, respected grandfather, revered great-grandfather—George's name on that stone makes note of his life of 64 years. His name, engraved there by some anonymous artisan, causes him to be known and still recalled.

In the case of a document like the Declaration of Independence, the affixing of one's name is an endorsement and a pledge of the highest order to that great cause. It represents the closeness between cause and personhood, belief and identity.

A church membership roll is also that sort of document. Your name there signifies a commitment of life to God and an intention to follow in the ways of Jesus. It is more than just a desire to be included within a particular fellowship; it is a pledge. That is why you join the church not simply by application, but by taking a vow of membership. You join first and foremost the Church of Jesus Christ, but also this particular congregation of that larger Church.

Joining the church is something we do, not because we are perfect, and thereby worthy. We join for precisely the opposite reason. We realize the disparity between who we are and who we might be, and understand that Christ is the bridge. He takes us from where we are to what we can become. He lays out before us the way of full life. He promises that his spirit will be with us as we live our days in dedication to God's service.

Note that when Jesus sent out the seventy the personal traits of those selected wasn't mentioned. Each surely had gifts and skills, but that wasn't determinant. The crucial thing seems to have been that they readily opened themselves to the power that God might provide. Otherwise, they would have been unable to accomplish this important task entrusted to them.

They go out willingly to do the work that Jesus asks of them. They come back even more excited because they are able to report the many deeds done in his name. They accomplished things that they otherwise would have considered impossible.

It is one thing to have their names on a list, a roll of those chosen for a special mission, but it is only in acting on that designation that they really become true disciples. They accept the charge given them by Jesus and, in so doing, fulfill their higher potential. They find within the greater self that is there all along. Jesus' confidence in them in borne out.

Now having your name placed in the membership book of this church is good, but that's really a beginning point. The important part is what you do after that. Joining with your friends here in mission can lead to life-changing experiences. Your willingness to act on what you believe allows you to discover and do things which you might have thought to be beyond your capacity That's powerful and energizing.

Having your name on the Highlands roster is both right and rewarding; but Jesus would probably say don't rejoice at this. Rejoice instead from knowing that your name is in the book of heaven. That's where it's really important, as vital as anything you ever do with the life given you.

In 1927 a sculptor by the name of Gutzon Borglum was ready to undertake the most important art work of his career. It would be on a scale, and of such national importance, that few would even dream of attempting it. Borglum had the vision and was willing to commit himself to making it a reality.

He visited South Dakota to look for a suitable site for this monumental project. When he came upon Mount Rushmore, he knew that here was the place. He could envision the huge faces of four famous Americans coming to life upon the side of that mountain. And so he began his work to put the likenesses there of Washington and Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Lincoln.

For fourteen years Borglum worked with innumerable assistants and helpers. He had to devise new techniques to carve the solid granite, giving up the sculptor's chisel for power drills and dynamite. Not until a few months before America's entry into WWII was the huge monument finished. Each of the faces was the size of a six story building. The eyes alone were eleven feet wide.

In a later interview Borglum said that his only regret was the criticism by some for taking so long to finish. Everything, however, had to be precise and done just right, for it would be here a hundred thousand years or more—for good or for bad. Borglum added, "You see, my name is on that monument just as surely as that of the four Presidents."

Well, congregations come and go. You may be part of this church today and another should you sometime move away. Ultimately that isn't important. Instead, strive to live into your discipleship so that your name might be written in the book of heaven, where even the age of mountains will seem like a mere day. That's where your membership counts. That's the roll of names with the vastness of eternity.