

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
6.14.26 - Pride Evensong

Happy Pride! Now this second reading we just heard from the Acts of the Apostles contains a dizzying number of names of leaders of the early Jesus movement. We can get bogged down trying to sort out Barnabus and Simeon and the false prophet whose name is Bar-Jesus, son of Jesus, who Paul says should really be called son of Satan.

Even our main character Paul has two names -- he is described as Saul, also known as Paul.

Saul, also known as Paul.

Now, some of us may have heard in Sunday school or Bible study or popular movies, that St Paul the apostle started out as Saul, a persecutor of the Jesus movement. He was on the road to Damascus, and was knocked off his horse and saw a blinding light and heard Jesus' voice, and Saul was converted to Christianity, and he changed his name to Paul after that.

This is a great story, except it is wrong. For starters, there is no horse in the Bible story. There is certainly no conversion to Christianity, which did not yet exist. Paul lived and died an observant Jew. And Paul did not change his name. As we can see in this passage, a passage that comes long after Paul has his encounter with the risen Jesus, Paul has not changed his name at all. Instead, like many people traveling through different communities, Paul went by Saul, the Hebrew version of his name, when he was with Jews, and Paul, the Greek version, when he was among Gentiles.

Saul, also known as Paul.

Those of us who are gay or queer or trans or nonbinary, we know a lot about what it means to be Saul also known as Paul. We know what it means to modify our behavior or our way of speaking or our clothes and mannerisms in order to fit into different spaces. We know what it means to tone it down at our job or with our extended family or even maybe in our place of worship, to go by Paul sometimes in order to not stand out as much.

When we first come out, to ourselves and to others, we can feel this really acutely. Maybe we push down feelings that we are not like the other kids, that we are not comfortable in this dating situation, that we are not in the right body. Some of us remember hiding from ourselves, struggling with what

we knew was true, or what we were afraid might be true about ourselves. Maybe we put away certain books or fliers or photos when parents came over, spoke really vaguely at work about how our weekend went. Many of us remember hiding from others, playing Paul in public and only letting Saul hang around in the safety of our home or a few select spaces.

Even when we are out as LGBTQ people we can censor ourselves to try to seem more respectable or presentable. We may hear things like, I have no problems with gay people as long as they don't throw it in our face. Or something I heard when I was working as a psychiatrist and leading an organization of LGBTQ psychiatrists -- it's ok to be openly gay in this field, but don't try to make a career out of it or anything! Sometimes people were reluctant to take leadership positions in the organization for fear of seeming "too gay."

Black and brown people and women know all about having to present different parts of ourselves and even police our own thoughts, and if we are queer or trans and one of those other identities, we have a more complicated dance to do and probably more names than just Saul and Paul.

The thing is, it takes a lot of energy to show the world Paul, when inside you are really Saul. It takes a lot of energy to even figure out which name you are using in which situation.

To really live into our life's purpose, our call, that call that these saints in the book of Acts are being faithful to, to follow God and build a just world together, you need to be the realest you that you can. You don't need to be wasting any energy in remembering what name you should go by.

I would not have been able to hear God's call to ministry if I didn't first come out and come to love myself as the gay woman God made me to be.

I would not have been able to give myself to loving and following God if I had not first fallen in love with and given myself to my wife.

To really thrive, to really live the life God made us to live, we must say yes to love, again and again. And when we say yes, to loving ourselves, to loving others, to loving God, there is no limit to the amount of love we can give and get in return.

There will still be those around us who will say, I'm sorry, I just can't pronounce the name Saul, I'm bad at foreign languages. It's not grammatical. We can choose to walk away from them or we can

choose to let them call us Paul. We can choose to keep loving them and hope they come along with us at some point.

Saul, who was also known as Paul.

The thing is, God doesn't want us to hide or pretend, or make ourselves into a more socially acceptable version. God made us, all of us, wonderful and beloved and in God's own image, just as we are.

God wants us to be all ourselves all the time.

So to everyone here, whether you are Saul, Paul, Barnabus, Lucius of Cyrene, even all you Bar-Jesuses (I see you!) -- keep loving yourself, keep going deeper into that truest and realest self you are, the person God made you to be. Don't be afraid to show all your colors, to be fully yourself. And don't ever be afraid to ask us to call you by your name. Happy Pride! Amen.