

Baptism of Our Lord

Jan 14, 2018

Call Me By Your Name

In the name of the one who names us and claims us and saves us all, amen.

Your coming of age story may have included this little dialog. I'm totally embarrassed to say that mine did:

Mom, Dad, I've met a boy. (Or girl. Insert the gender identity of your choice)

Oh, that's nice, honey. Who are his people?

Who are his people? What is your tribe? How will we know you? Our name and our identity have never been more important, according to David Lose, former president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary. He writes, "We are at a time and place where so many would like to identify and define us by many, many names: Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight. Rich or poor, black or white, and the list goes on and on. Additionally, we are also and increasingly named and defined by the products we use or stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany, Hallmark- these are not just company names but lend a particular sense of self, and... the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars and computers convey a great deal of our identity.

Names are important. I just did a Google search for names of Jesus and in literally two seconds came up with a list including Jesus, Emmanuel, Christ, Lord, Master, Logos, Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, Lamb of God, Light of the World, King of the Jews, and Rabbi. But I think if we were to ask him, Jesus would say that the name he likes best is the one that his father gave him at his baptism. Beloved.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Beloved. With you I am well pleased. What a gift, to know who you are and that you are unreservedly loved. To know who your people are.

We've seen lots of baptisms here, many folks of all ages have had their names recited and been told that they are children of God. They are named as God's beloved and told to renounce anything that tells them otherwise, all the competing voices that try to tell them what they are or

what they aren't: good enough, thin enough, rich enough powerful enough. They are told that they are God's beloved. Rachel Held Evans says that baptism is an act of defiance, because the world will always try to categorize us, to name us and in baptism we say "no, my name is beloved."

Speaking of acts of defiance, let's imagine Jesus' baptism. Joanne Whitt, senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in San Anselmo CA, tells it like this:

"John performed his baptisms not in the holy city of Jerusalem but over 80 miles to the north and east; not in the private holy baths but out in public, in the countryside on the banks of the Jordan River. John was announcing that traveling to a special city and an opulent building would not make people clean and holy. What they needed was not a change of location, but a change of heart. John's baptism was a protest- John the Baptist was out there protesting the establishment. That means that we can assume something about the folks who gathered at the river to hear him: all those other folks who didn't find comfort in traditional religion, who weren't sure traditional religion could address their questions and doubts, or that traditional religion cared about their real lives and real problems, including the problems of an oppressive regime and inflexible religious leaders. That's who was desperate enough to traipse out into the desert to listen to a man everyone thought was crazy. Then along comes Jesus. He asks John to bless him, to baptize him. In doing so, he's identifying with the protest. He's dunked in the river just like everyone else."

She concludes by saying that we are all given the name Beloved as our gift of baptism. That "each of us longs to hear words of acceptance, identity, blessing and commitment and we receive that assurance in baptism. We are called God's beloved children not because of something we do but because of who God is- a loving parent who wants nothing more than to see us flourish. It is our most holy and sacred work, she reminds us, to remember our names and to live as though we believe them.

At Christmas we celebrated the fact that God loves us enough to take human form, become incarnate and to live among us. At Jesus' baptism, standing in the river, he knew who he was, like us, a child of God, the beloved, and he knew whose he was forever. And it freed him to love with abandon, to live out his life loving his friends, his people, all he touched. That's why they followed him: nondescript poor people, peasants, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners- people about whom no one ever said a good word. He gave them a new name, a new dignity: child of God, you belong to me forever. Do not fear. I have called you by name, you are mine.

Anne Lamott knows who she is. She also knows what she isn't and she has no qualms about knowing WHOSE she is. She writes "I never said I was a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, 'Hi, Lord,' and he says 'Hello, Darling.' He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. If I were the only person on earth, he would still have died for me."

It's hard work, getting to that place, turning our backs and closing our ears to those negative messages and believing that God keeps our pictures in his wallet.

You know I can't get through a sermon without bringing Saint Nadia into it, but one of the things she loves most about this gospel is that God says that he is well pleased and that Jesus is his beloved before Jesus had really done anything. That he didn't say "This is my son in whom I am well pleased because he has proved to me that he deserves it, he has a quiet time with me each morning and always reads his Torah and boy, can he heal a leper." As far as we know, Jesus hadn't even done anything yet and he was called beloved. The one in whom the father was well pleased."

I read about something called the Rosenthal- Jacobsen study, demonstrating the so-called Pygmalion effect. Teachers were told at the beginning of the term that certain children were gifted, regardless of the actual capacity of those children and the study showed that by the end of the year, those kids were soaring off the charts from their peers. They became what they were believed to be. God is like that, Nadia says. God is like a teacher who has been duped into thinking you are "gifted" then treats you like you are special and then that's what you end up being.

You ARE gifted, gifted with unearned, unending love. You are accepted, in the words of Paul Tillich, "accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now, perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

You are accepted. You are beloved. Beloved. It is everybody's most important name. Keep saying it. Keep remembering it. Keep believing it. Keep recognizing it in others. Keep living it. God adores you and keeps your picture in his wallet.

Amen.