

This morning, on the Baptism of our Lord, both our lessons include the idea of names and naming. Giving a name or being named are quite a big deal for most of us. Not just names for people, but for pets or things. For example, last week I came upon the list of names we'd considered for our new kitten, Madeline, whom we adopted several years ago. There were 20 names on the list, I kid you not! I remember how Phil and I laughed and agonized over the choices. As many have noticed, we just got a new used car, in the aftermath of plowing into a deer herd on the Expressway; as soon as I learned the color of the car was "sonic gray", I said to Phil, let's name this car "Sonic", and we did. You get it, right? Names do matter to us. I think the reason we give great thought to naming is that what we name is significant to us and we want the importance and individuality of what we name to be *represented* in that name.

Pastors know about this, because we perform a number of significant public functions where names matter. One of my greatest horrors when I perform a wedding, funeral, or baptism is that I will somehow muff up the names involved. You might think that couldn't happen, but you'd be surprised what you forget or what comes out of your mouth under the pressure of a public moment. People care about these things, especially for official moments. I remember one of my college friends, Laurie Eckblad, complaining that on her high school diploma, they'd spelled her name not as Eckblad, a fine, old Swedish name, but Eckbald, a name she didn't care for at all. She sent it back to be corrected, in fact. "Call me particular," she said, "but I wanted it to be right."

Most of us feel that way about our names, when you come right down to it. Whether it's our official and given name, or a name we've adopted somewhere along the way as a nickname, we want it to be right. In the face of a large and impersonal world, it is very affirming to have our name known. Accordingly, *God* knows us by name. Most often, we associate that naming of ourselves by God with Holy Baptism. Today on the Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord, we reflect about the meaning of Baptism for Christ and ourselves, *and* about the importance of being known to God by our name.

Let's back up for just a brief refresher on sacraments for a moment. As you know, the Lutheran church celebrates two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. A Sacrament consists of a Word from

God and of a concrete, earthly element. Four of our children celebrated their First Holy Communion last Sunday, and it was a joyful Sunday, because the sacraments are all about joy. Holy Communion, as a sacrament, involves a Word from God--Christ saying, "This is my body, given for you, this is my blood, shed for you." And it involves the earthly elements of bread and wine. In Baptism, the earthly element is obviously water, and we shouldn't pass over that too lightly. As the saying goes, "Water is life." We know all about water, because we live next to 10% of the entire planet's fresh water supply. We love our Lake Superior and we are protective of it. We love our Knife River and all our rivers, and unlike our forebears in faith of the Holy Scripture, who lived in a desert, we generally experience an abundance of water. How blest we are! It's no coincidence that water is the element for this joyful sacrament of Baptism, celebrating our new life in Christ. So, water is the earthly element, and the Word for the sacrament again comes from Christ, who says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In baptism, we say that God is claiming us as God's own beloved child. We believe that in baptism, we experience a word from God, that God speaks our name with love.

But, having said that, let's pause for a moment and consider: what's really the big deal about baptism? Why should we do it? What does it mean? Our former Bishop, Pastor Tom Aitkin, had previously served a congregation in International Falls, and he related this story about baptism: There was a couple with a baby vacationing in his vicinity, the woman having grown up in International Falls and having been a member of Pastor Aitkin's church in her past. The man had no particular church background. While they were vacationing there, the woman was struck by the notion that they should have their baby boy baptized at her former church. Accordingly, the couple came in to visit with Pastor Aitkin about it, and he took advantage of the visit to do some education about baptism. He spoke about how, in Baptism, we receive God's grace as a gift. He spoke of how baptism means also becoming a part of a larger family, the church. He spoke about how as part of the Christian family, we strive to live and love like Jesus, walking in the way of service and self-sacrifice, living out the lifestyle we discover in Scripture passages like the Beatitudes where we learn, for example, that the meek are blest. And to his credit, the man of the couple responded in honest dismay---"This isn't what I thought

baptism was about at all! I thought it was just a little ritual you did so you could say you'd done it. If this is what baptism means, I don't want that for my son. I want my son to be a success in this world, to get ahead, and that won't happen if he aims to be meek, self-sacrificing, and service oriented."

This incident, I think, highlights the fact that we really don't understand baptism. And I think our misunderstandings fall into two categories: either we don't take it very seriously at all, it's just a ritual we do to say we've done it. *Or* we take it seriously in the wrong way---we regard it as fire insurance, as something we *must do* as soon as possible to insure the eternal salvation of the infant to be baptized to keep them from the fires of hell. Now a word or two about this latter view, which turns baptism into a kind of magical rite and hell-fire insurance. This view suggests that God is so *capricious* that God would condemn an un-baptized infant to hell as a matter of principal, and that is a monstrous accusation to level against God. Do we really believe that a child, prior to baptism, is doomed to hellfire and is not already God's beloved child? Is that the kind of God we know in Christ? Sadly, many who take baptism seriously do so for the wrong reason: hell-fire insurance. I must save my baby from hell, they think! And that's not what baptism is.

But, equally, many don't take baptism seriously at *all* and regard it as being of no great significance, apart from being a photo op and something you do to get it done. That's not true either. Baptism is neither magical fire insurance *nor* a trivial but meaningless rite; it is a *sacrament of God's grace*. As such, we are on the receiving end of gifts from God when we are baptized. Gifts like eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and becoming a part of God's family. The gift of God's love and forgiveness and redemption is a gift given once-for-all. That's on God's part. But on *our* part, growing into understanding God's grace involves living into our faith over the years. Most of us must learn again and again that we need to be forgiven and forgiving; that we repeatedly need renewal and second chances; that eternal life has as much to do with living richly and fully now as it does with heaven later on. We celebrate Holy Baptism recognizing that it is but the beginning of the journey of faith, a faith that we grow in and affirm again and again throughout our lives. We affirm that baptismal faith in the rite of confirmation, which two of our young people will be doing this May. We are affirming our baptismal faith today, on this annual festival of the Baptism of our Lord, which presents us with

an opportunity to renew and celebrate our Baptism later in the service. And very likely, we look to renew and affirm our faith any number of times throughout a year, a month, a week, or a day, as we live in relationship with God. Holy Baptism gives us the assurance that we are claimed, loved, and known by God; that *God speaks our name*. How do we know this?

Let's look at our lessons for today more closely. In our first lesson, from the prophet Isaiah, we begin with one of my all-time favorite Bible verses, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created, you, he who formed you, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." I loved this verse so much that it was the theme verse for my ordination, which happened nearly 39 years ago. It spoke to me then of God's personal love for me and encouraged me in my calling to ministry. 39 years later and looking towards retirement in June, this verse *still* speaks fervently to me of God's love and claim on me, personally. I hope it does the same for you. Isaiah assures us that the God who made us is also the God who redeems us and who calls us by name, who claims us as God's own. This Scripture is chosen on a Sunday with a baptismal theme, because we know that in the rite of baptism, we speak the name of the one baptized in conjunction with speaking of God's promise of knowing, loving, and claiming that named one--which demonstrates the personal and individual quality of God's relationship to each person. We're not just a number or another face in the vast crowd, we are named, we are known. God speaks our name.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. As he was baptized, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like dove and a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." So again, as in Isaiah, the voice of God names us---Jesus is named or identified as God's Son, as One beloved by God. When we baptize, we proclaim that the same love and naming are happening between God and ourselves.

The amazing thing about Baptism is that it is both universal and individual. Holy Baptism brings us into the family of God, the believers in Christ. That is a huge and diverse family, as you know. We become kin with folk of all languages, colors, traditions, backgrounds, nationality and so on. We also become kin with the specific congregational family into which we are baptized. That's why I always joyfully carry the child up and

down aisles, reminding us that this is our new little sister or brother in Christ—both our joy and our responsibility. So, like so many things, Baptism *isn't* just all about us—it's about a family of which we become a part. It has universal implications that impact how we live. Which might scare some off, as in that couple in the International Falls story.

And then again, in a sense, Holy Baptism *is* all about us, individually. Because an *individual* relationship is established in baptism of the most personal kind, a one-on-one relationship between the baptized one and the God of the galaxies. And that matters! As my husband likes to point out, if I were to ask him, “Honey, do you love me?” and he replied, “I love everyone”, I would not be particularly pleased or impressed. It doesn't necessarily matter to me if he loves everyone in the abstract; I need to hear that he loves *me*, *individually, as his wife*. And it's the same principal at work in Holy Baptism. Yes, God loves everyone. Great news if you can wrap your brain around that grand abstraction! But, does God love *me*? Me, broken, sinful, delightful, irritating, uniquely me? That's a question of faith where the rubber hits the road. Baptism answers that question with a resounding “yes”. God doesn't merely love *everyone*; God loves *you* and claims *you by name*. And that is the particularity, the specificity, the *individuality* of baptism that stands in tension with the *universality* of baptism and the church. Both aspects of Baptism are absolutely true and important.

This morning, we *celebrate* our renewal of baptism ; both our entry into the vast family of the baptized and also our being named, known, and claimed by God. It is a joy to recognize that we are known, personally, in all our individual quirkiness, by God, and loved, redeemed and cherished just the same. Named before God, loved by God, we can navigate our life's journey by faith. “You are my son, the beloved” God says at the baptism of Christ.. Those same words are spoken for all of us today who affirm our baptismal faith: “You are mine, the beloved. I have called you by name, you are mine.” That's why baptism matters and that's why we celebrate and give thanks to God—because we are named, claimed, and loved. Amen.