

Sermon, Epiphany 5A; February 9, 2020
Church of the Ascension;
Rev. Dr. Robert Petite

You are the salt of the earth, . . . you are the Light of the world. Matthew 5:13, 14.

We hear a lot about bullying in the media these days. And I suspect that if there are any of us in the congregation this morning who did not quite fit into the norm when we were young children or adolescents, we probably have experienced being bullied.

One of the forms that bullying often takes is in the use of pejorative names. These negative names can enter deep into our subconscious as children, and are capable of defining who we are, not only by others but more importantly, how we begin to conceive of ourselves. Children have a tendency to become what they are named. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” That’s not really true, is it? Names can hurt a lot. But names can also heal and restore, names like beloved and friend, among others.

What is true in the emotional and psychological growth and development of children and the development of their identity and future as adults, is also true in our spiritual growth and maturation as adult Christians. The receiving of a name is an important part of taking on a Christian identity. We all know that naming is a central element of Baptism.

In the Jewish tradition, to know someone’s name is to know them intimately. The Scriptures are filled with stories of naming. God brings all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky to Adam to see what he will name them (Genesis 2:19). Abram is given the new name Abraham, because he will become “the ancestor of many nations” (Genesis 17: 6.). Sara is given the name Sarah, because she is to be blessed with a child in her old age. (Gen. 17:15). Jacob is given a new name, Israel.” (Genesis 32:28) after his successful struggle with the angel; and Simon is given a new name, Cephas, Peter or rock, a sign of his faith. The naming of Jesus, Savior of his people, is central to who he is and who he will become.

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:10-11 (NIV)

These namings in the Scripture are powerful indicators of a person’s being given identity, and place in the world. Like these patriarchs, matriarchs, and saints of the Bible, we too have been given a new name.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called, (or named) children of God; and so we are. 1 John 3:1

One of the aims of the season of Epiphany is to shine a light on the character of Christian identity, not only on the person of Jesus, but also on the lives of those who follow him. There is a lot of naming going on in this liturgical season.

In Epiphany, we are invited to grasp season as marked by a series of stories that have a lot to do with naming, - with identity. Epiphany is concerned with the naming of Jesus, and with the proclamation of who Jesus is. There is the story of the wise men where Jesus is named as king, God, and victim, through the elements of the Magi's gifts, the story of the Baptism where Jesus is named as Beloved Son, and the visit to the temple in Jerusalem where Jesus is named as Wisdom.

These Epiphany stories connect through a common theme: they are all ways of helping us to see the identity of Jesus. But these naming stories also speak about our own Christian identity.

For example, if we look at the story of the Baptism for a moment, we learn that this story of Jesus' identity, his Naming, as a "*Beloved Son, in whom God is well pleased*", is also a story about our own identity as adopted children of God. As Jesus is a beloved Son, we, through our shared humanity with him, are beloved Children of God.

Because Jesus, this Beloved Son of God genuinely participates in our human nature, the deep truth about Jesus is also a deep truth about who we are and who we are invited to become.

The New Testament not only provides us with a new story of what God is really like. It also advances a story of what we are like. "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*" I John 3:1-3.

The story about Jesus as Beloved Son, and our own identity as children of God is actually a story that finds its roots in the Genesis story where we are created in the image of God. The Gospels are really a re-telling of the seminal story of our creation. The bestowing of our identity as Children of God, is the healing of God's original image in us, that was broken in the Garden. That divine image, perfectly restored and represented in Jesus, is once again restored to us through our union with him.

St. Paul offers a hint of this restoration when he says in this morning's Epistle "*We speak of God's secret and hidden wisdom, which God decreed before the ages, for our glory.* I Cor. 2:6.

This Christian identity as a child of God, involves a very distinctive kind of life; a life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and all the other gifts of the Spirit.

But the task of living this particular kind of life can only happen through our free consent and cooperation. We all have to live into our Christian names, into this new identity. We all begin our Christian pilgrimage rather like children, whom God means, at the right time and in the right way, to grow up.

To live into our Christian identity as Children of God simply requires that we make some adult choices.

We make these choices within the support and nurture of the Christian community. The promises we made at our Baptism are adult choices; to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. It is an adult choice to resist evil and repent, to

proclaim Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to respect the dignity of everyone.

It is an adult choice to seek the nurture of the Eucharist, as a means to enter more deeply into the life of Christ and to secure the spiritual strength necessary to fulfill our Baptismal promises.

It is also an adult choice to live into our savory saltiness, and to be a refection in the world of the light of Christ. When Jesus says you are the salt of the earth, and the light of the world, he is asserting a divine reality, two new names, if you will, among many. We are salt, we are Light. If we are to use these gifts, there are adult choices to be made. We are to take a stand against all in the world that would separate us from the love of Christ and our neighbor

That we are salt and that we are light is in our Christian DNA, placed there since the dawn of creation, when we were made in the divine image; an image re-confirmed and re-constituted in us when we were re-born through our Baptism into the life of Christ.

Of course, what particular shape our own individual Christian lives will take, as the salt of the earth and as the light of the world, is unique to each of us. That's another way of saying that we each have our own unique and individual name attached to our calling as Children of God. As the writer of the Book of Revelations has so mysteriously declared. *"To the victor in the battle of life I will give a share in the manna that was hidden away, and I will give [him]them a white stone, and on the stone a new name will be inscribed, a name undisclosed to anyone accept the person who receives it.* Rev. 2:17.

Such is the mystery of our own lives, hidden as they are in the holy providence of God, as we wait upon the divine impetus, to make the adult choice to live into that divine calling.