



Saturday April 14<sup>th</sup>, 11 gentlemen gathered for some fellowship and food in a monthly tradition called the Men's Prayer Breakfast or MPB. With the exception of one of our member's wife paying us a visit a few times it was a manly event. Mark Gimmi provided the food and what a delight! I don't know what it was because it didn't stay on my plate long but I believe it was from the casserole clan and had all kinds of breakfast "stuff" in it. It was outstanding! During our meal and before devotions we shared a few stories about obtaining driver's license and driving overseas. We didn't have time

for a lot of small talk because we were fortunate to have a guest speaker. Ralph Morse addressed the MPB about Project Mend-A-House and an upcoming event they're getting ready to have the following Saturday. Ralph told us in detail how Mend-a-House helps those less fortunate and all the great work he and several members from our congregation have done to support this great cause. After Ralph was done and answered our questions, I had the devotions.

This morning's devotions were titled "Named & Claimed." How do you introduce yourself to someone you just met? How does your identity influence your life? As when you broke away from your parents, the influence of their friends exerts greater and greater influence in your life. Using Isaiah 43:1b "...I have called you by name; you are mine." and Mark 1:11 "You are my beloved child...with you I am well pleased." as our texts, our theme will challenge us to look at and to explore what it means to be NAMED & CLAIMED as a beloved child of God. We will explore our evolving identities in the context of our life as a Christian, primarily as a child of God created in and as a member of the body of Christ. We will provide a balance to the messages of the media and their peers, who may seem to label them or relegate them to some niche identity. We will discuss how God has created us as unique and wonderful individuals, God's purpose for us, and how in God's great love for us, God redeemed us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

#### **WHAT IS MY NAME?**

Are names important? Why or why not? Names are important - they contain meaning. They can even identify who we are. Names are given, acquired, assigned, chosen, wanted or not, are identifiers. Names can help us to acknowledge and express relationships. Are you named after someone? What are the pros / cons of being named after someone? Do you "like" your name? Have you ever wished you had a different name? Would you like a more "unique" or less "unique" name? Jesus means "God saves." We discussed some of the names in our MPB and what they meant. The power to name can be overwhelming - ask any parent or pet owner. One of the first questions asked of new parents / pet owners is, "What is his/her name?" Let's take a look at Isaiah 43:1 "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." In this text, God is speaking directly to the reader, assuring us that God knows us by name. Each of us, individually, is known by name by God. How do you feel when someone forgets your name? How do you feel when someone remembers your name? We feel more valued and respected when someone remembers our name. We feel more engaged in a conversation when someone uses our name. What does it mean to you that God knows you by name? What would it be like if we treated a person's name as if it were the most important thing about them?

#### **WHAT DO OTHERS CALL ME?**

To get a better understanding of this question I had to guys play the Label Game. I placed one label on the back of each person. They could not read their label. Then I had them talk and interact with one another, where they treat others according to the label that's on their back without using the word on the label. The goal was for them to try and guess what their label was by the way they were treated. Afterwards they had to guess what their label was. A lot of good fun! When finished I asked: How did you feel about the way you were treated based on that label? Did you like it? Did you feel awkward? How did it feel to not have a choice of the label assigned to you? Afterwards, we talked about how we label groups. For example: Popular groups, jocks, nerds, attractive etc. How are these groups created? How do you know which group someone fits into? How are people sorted into different groups? Usually they are sorted by visible attributes, behavior, status, clothes, etc. Are people in different groups treated the same? Of course they're not. The MPB is a group but we're all different and treated differently. Jesus had a lot of labels placed on him during his life on earth? Blasphemer, teacher/rabbi, carpenter, Mary's son, one whose disciples don't follow tradition, King of the Jews, just to name a few. How did others treat Jesus based on their label for Him? How did Jesus react to some of these labels? What were some of the labels used for groups in Jesus' time? [Pharisees, disciples, Roman soldiers, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, Jews] How were these groups treated? How did Jesus treat them? What does Jesus tell us about how we should treat one another? He said, "Love one another as I have loved you."

Do you have any choice about the labels that are assigned to you in your life? We don't; how do you feel about that? What is it like when the label you're 'assigned' doesn't match who you are? What are some things you can do? Romans 12:2 says "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." What do you think this verse means? Sometimes doing what God wants means not doing what everyone else thinks is ok. When have you felt pressured to conform to a particular group? What is it like to feel pressured to conform? Everywhere we go we are finding out what people think about us. It may be from family, friends, strangers, or companies. Companies tell you what they think about you because they want to sell you things and they usually do it from a negative point of view...you're not tech savvy enough, you're not tall enough, you're not dressed well enough, you're not fun enough, etc. We see this in commercials, in the grocery store line, on website ads, and more. So what information do we let stick to us about who we are? Why? Thinking back to the verse, why is important to focus on God rather than blindly conforming? What or who can help us to do this?

### **What Does God Call Me?**

We've talked a lot about how we define ourselves and how others define us. But what really counts is how God defines us. God has created you as a unique child and with a unique purpose for you.

Read the following verses: Isaiah 43:1 "But now, O Israel, the LORD who created you says: "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine."

Jeremiah 1:4-5 "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you."

Mark 1:11 "You are my beloved (child)...with you I am well pleased."

Romans 8:14 "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

Matthew 5:14-15 "You are the light of the world – like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all."

Ephesians 5: 8-10 "For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord."

The above verses defined us several ways: "God's child, child of light, the light of the world."

What does God say that it means for us to be God's children? God says we should try to do what is pleasing to God, to be God's light on earth. Being a child of God should make you feel special, singled out, and blessed. How does being a child of God help you live out your life? Because we are connected to a larger family through our baptism; we know we are loved by God no matter what. How does your faith help you live your life? Does it impact how you behave, the choices you make, the way you think about things, the way you deal with hard times?

Do you talk about your faith with any of your friends, specifically your non-church friends?

Do you ever find yourself labeled as a Christian? If so, what do you think of that? Do you embrace it? Are you embarrassed by it?

We have all played "Simon Says" growing up. You know the rules, if you don't hear, "Simon says," you should ignore the command. Even though the rules are clearly stated what is expected from you, many times you didn't follow the directions. Why? Because it was hard to pay attention, too many things going on too fast. When you're trying to follow God's will, do you sometimes feel like you do when playing Simon Says? What are some ways God speaks to us? He speaks through the Bible, by responding to our prayers, and through the voices of others. What makes it hard for you to hear God speaking to you? Maybe by not knowing what to listen for, or trying to hear God amidst all the other noise and busy-ness of our lives.

John 14: 16 suggest how to make it easier to hear God speaking to you? "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." God has sent his Holy Spirit to help us and guide us as we seek to listen to him. Sometimes it's not easy, but the important thing is to keep trying.

Romans 3:23-24 "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

It's sometimes hard for us to bring God into our daily lives and to develop a relationship with Him. Just remember, though, that God wants to be with you, to guide you through your life. God loves you so much that God sent Jesus down to live as a human, to struggle with the same things you struggle with. He had to deal with being ridiculed and labeled; he suffered pain and faced rejection. But through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has redeemed us and given us the gift of Eternal Life. That's an amazing gift, and accepting the grace that God offers us is one of the ways that we can develop a closer connection to God.

How can knowing what God thinks about you change the way you think about yourself? How does knowing what God thinks about you change the way you think and talk about others?

Listen to the following Bible verses and take note of a particular word or phrase that jumps out at you.

Read Matthew 16:13-18 "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." When Jesus asked the question "Who do you say that I am," he was speaking to the disciples but only Simon Peter answered. Simon said that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Why did Peter answer when the others didn't? Because he felt called by God to speak boldly. Afterwards Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, giving him a new identity and a new mission.

So... if we are Named and Claimed as children of God, what does that mean? What are we Named and Claimed for? What is our new mission? Let's look at promises we make in the Affirmation of Baptism –The words in our liturgy for the Affirmation of Baptism read: Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism: live among God's faithful people; hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper; proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed; serve all people following the example of Jesus; and strive for justice and peace in all the earth?" Response: We do, and ask God to help and guide us. In our baptism, we were each Named and Claimed as a child of God. In the Affirmation of Baptism, we affirm our intentions to live into these promises, to "live our baptism." God has Named and Claimed each one of us. Shouldn't knowing this have an impact on how we live our lives, and how we talk to others about our faith? Especially today, when it's important to be sensitive to the beliefs of others, it's hard to know when and how to talk about being a Christian. The good news is that God is here to help us and to guide us in living our lives. If we take the time to listen, God can reveal God's purpose for us. Remember Peter – God revealed to him that Jesus was his Son, the Messiah. And Peter had so much faith in this that he was able to make a very bold statement, in front of all the other disciples. The other disciples may have been thinking the same thing, but they weren't willing to speak up. Maybe they were afraid of being embarrassed or looking stupid. But Peter was confident and felt bold enough to make this radical statement and to call Jesus the Messiah. It was Peter's faith that helped him to speak out without fear. When we make plans to be with God and spend time in Christian community, our faith grows stronger. And strong faith will help us to make bold statements in our own lives – statements that include others as children of God.

Thank you for allowing me to share this message with you. Named & Claimed was the theme for Shekinah this year when Stacey and I took the confirmation class to ELCA's yearly weekend retreat. I hope you enjoyed it. God Bless ~Ray