

# SHEKINAH 2018

How do you introduce yourself to someone you just met? How does your identity influence your life? In the world of a Middle School Youth, individual identity and how that identity relates to the larger social sphere of their friends and classmates is a preoccupying issue. As they begin to break away from their parents, the influence of their friends exerts greater and greater influence in their lives. This was the focus during Shekinah, ELCA's annual retreat in Front Royal, Virginia the weekend of March 16<sup>th</sup>. Stacey Rosenquist and I chaperoned Jillian Rosenquist and Alexa White to this year's retreat. This was the smallest class we took and unfortunately will be the last of our confirmands for some time.

Shekinah is a Hebrew word that means *the presence of God*. The concept is like that in the Gospel of Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in their midst." One goal of the weekend is for youth to realize Shekinah in their lives.

This year's Shekinah theme was titled "Named and Claimed." In Isaiah 43:1b it reads, "...I have called you by name; you are mine." and in Mark 1:11 it reads, "You are my beloved child...with you I am well pleased." We challenged the youth this weekend to look at and to explore what it means to be NAMED & CLAIMED as a beloved child of God. The main goal for Shekinah this weekend was to explore with our youth their evolving identities in the context of their life as a Christian, primarily as a child of God created in and as a member of the body of Christ. We tried to 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 discussed how God 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. Throughout the weekend, we focused on three primary themes, drawing parallels to youth and their search for identity. The three themes to be emphasized were: What is my name? What do others call me? What does God call me? We wrapped it up with Naming & Claiming.

## What is My Name?

Names are important because they contain meaning. They can even identify who we are. Names - 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." Do you know what your name means? If so, how is that meaning reflected in your life? These are just a few of the questions we asked and discussed during the weekend. 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 remembers your name? Don't you feel valued and respected? We feel more engaged in a conversation when someone uses our name.

## What do Others Call Me?

During one group activity we played the Label Game. During this game I would place a label on each student's back. They could not see their label but everyone else could. These labels had words like: Gossip, Drama Queen, Jock, Grumpy etc. The goal was to treat that person like you would in real life and then they had to guess what their label read. It was a lot of fun. Afterwards we asked, "How did you feel about the way you were treated based on that label? Did you like it? Did you feel awkward?" To me the most important question was, "How did it feel to not have a choice of the label assigned to you?" Too many times we all label people when we really don't know them. What were some of the labels that were used for Jesus during his life on earth? -Blasphemer, teacher/rabbi, carpenter, Mary's son, one whose disciples don't follow tradition, King of the Jews. How did others treat Jesus based on their label for Him? How did Jesus react to some of these labels? What does Jesus tell us about how we should treat one another? He said, "Love one another as I have loved you" During this lesson we read Romans 12:2, "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." Sometimes doing what God wants means not doing what everyone else thinks is OK.

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.

#### 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.

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

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." (NLT)

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." (NRSV)

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." (NRSV)

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." (NLT)

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." (NRSV)

God defined us as God's child, child of light, the light of the world. We should try to do what is pleasing to God, to be God's light on earth. We all are connected to a larger family through our baptism; we know we are loved by God no matter what – from last year's Shekinah: There is nothing we can do that can make God love us less.

We played a game that you all know called Simon Says. You know the rules, you're told to do certain actions but only if they say, "Simon says." After the game we all agreed that it was hard to pay attention because too many things were going on too fast. When you're trying to follow God's will, do you sometimes feel like you did during the game? How does God speak to us? Through the Bible, responding to our prayers, through the voice of others – all great answers! So if God speaks to us, what makes it hard for you to hear God? Maybe not knowing what to listen for, or trying to hear God amidst all the other noise and busy-ness of our lives?

In John 14:16 it reads, "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.

In Romans 3:23-24 you read, "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 God. 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.

#### Naming & Claiming

In Matthew 16:13-18 it reads, "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."

In this verse Jesus is speaking to the disciples and it is Simon Peter who answers saying that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Why did Peter answer when the others didn't? Because Peter felt called by God to speak boldly! Then 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. 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.

This was another great weekend that Stacey and I were blessed to share with Jillian and Alexa along with 19 other congregations and over 130 youth. I hope you enjoyed this article, God Bless.