

Sermon for January 8 2017 – Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. Amen

This past Friday, I was driving to Minneapolis and listening to National Public Radio as I went. On the air was an interview with Cornell Brooks, CEO and President of the NAACP. Mr. Brooks is a pastor, a long-time human rights advocate and a civil rights lawyer. Mr. Brooks had recently been arrested along with five other civil rights advocates during a sit-in at the office of Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions where they had demanded that Senator Sessions remove his name from consideration as Attorney General of the United States.

In the course of the interview, in which Mr. Brooks explained his opposition to Senator Sessions' nomination, Mr. Brooks at one point used Senator Sessions' entire name: Jefferson Beauregard Sessions, the Third. That caught the ear of the person conducting the interview, and he immediately asked Brooks why he used the senator's entire name. "Is there a significance to such a usage?"

After a pause, Mr. Brooks politely denied that there was any significance to referring to Sessions by using his full name. "That's his name, isn't it? Just as President Obama was named Barack Hussein Obama. It's just a name."

The interviewer did not follow up, but I couldn't let it go. The senator's full name had indeed been purposely used by Mr. Brooks. Its use supported his arguments that Senator Sessions had in his career endorsed anti-immigrant positions and often used racist language with reference to blacks. His first name, Jefferson, was, of course, that of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Similarly, the name Beauregard was that of a brigadier general for the South in the Civil War. And noting that Senator Sessions was the third in his family to use that name connotes a pride in the traditions of the past...most notably the traditions of the South.

Although no more mention was made in the interview of Senator Sessions' name, it lingered long after the broadcast was over. "Names matter," I thought to myself. "Names matter very much indeed!"

I know this to be true, of course, in other contexts. My daughter Julia insists that her name be spoken accurately. She'll not let anyone slide by with calling her Julie or Juliana. It's Julia, and nothing else.

Likewise, Julia will not let her dad play around with other people's names. I have the habit, for example, giving names to people who are driving cars in a manner that I find offensive or thoughtless. If someone passes me inappropriately or tail gates or cuts me off recklessly, I often give that person a name...incorporating their driving skills into the name that they receive. "There goes 'Sally Speedsalot'", I'll say...or "Get off my tail, 'Billy BumperRider.'" Julia will have none of it. "Dad, cut it out. That's not their name."

Again and again, I am reminded that names matter very much.

That's certainly the case in this morning's reading from Matthew. In the story of Jesus' baptism, the one thing which seems most at stake to me is his name. As Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism, he is identified for all to hear by God as "Beloved." Jesus is given an identity in his baptism...he is identified as

a "Child of God." God declares God's pleasure with Jesus, and God expresses God's unfailing commitment to this Beloved child. That is extremely important.

Not only for Jesus as he would soon begin his public ministry, but also for every one of us who has been baptized into the Christian faith. Above and beyond all other names given to us, the most important name is that which is given to us in Baptism. For we, too, are declared "Beloved." And we, too, are given our primary identity in life..."Child of God."

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that all of the other names which describe us are worthless. No indeed. Many of the names we've been given...surnames, nicknames, names of affiliation...are very important, to us and to others. But, I submit, while these names describe us...they do not define us.

We are defined...for all time...by the name we receive in baptism. In this sacrament, we are declared God's beloved children, those with whom God is well pleased. That is our identity. "Baptism matters because it tells us who we are by reminding us each whose we are: God's beloved child." (David Lose, "In the Meantime," January 4, 2017)

Last Wednesday night, I asked my ninth grade confirmation students what it means to be a Lutheran Christian. "What's one thing that's at the very heart of being Lutheran? What's one thing Lutherans have to contribute to the whole Christian family? What's the most important thing for you about being a Lutheran Christian?" One brave girl spoke up somewhat hesitantly, "I think it's because we believe that God loves us no matter what." She hit the nail on the head. And as we further explored other things that mark us as Lutheran Christians, we came back time and time again to what this girl had seen as central: "God loves us no matter what."

In his little biography of Martin Luther, historian Martin Marty zeroes in on this concept as being central to Luther's understanding of Christian freedom. Marty notes that Luther had made the bold assertion that "the only vow which matters comes not from humans but from God; (it is the) vow that God makes to us believers in baptism."

The prophet Isaiah says it this way, "Don't be afraid, for I have called you by name, and you are mine."

Oh, yes, we are God's beloved children.

David Lose, President of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, writes:

"This (simple) message, I believe, has never been more timely. For we live in a culture that promises acceptance only if we are...and here you must fill in the blank, for the messages of our commercial culture are as manifold as they insidious...skinny enough, strong enough, successful enough, rich enough, popular enough, beautiful enough, young enough, and so on. Which means that the message of baptism...that God has declared that we ARE enough, that God accepts us just as we are, and that God desires to do wonderful things for and through us...may be just what (we) so desperately need to hear." (David Lose, "Working Preacher," January 5, 2014)

And so, dear Child of God, may you never forget that in your baptism, God's voice from heaven spoke directly to you, saying, "You are indeed my Child, Beloved, and with you, I am well pleased." AMEN