

There are many names that we carry in life, titles related to work or volunteering, relationship names like mother, father, sister, brother, nicknames, our given names, middle names, and surnames, descriptions of our personality. One of the many names that I have that brings me the most joy, is the one that my nephews have given to me. When my oldest nephew was young he couldn't say Micol so I became Uncle Tall. The name has stuck and at five and a half he still calls me Uncle Tall, and so do his two younger brothers. When I hear them call out Uncle Tall when I walk in the door, or when we are playing on the ground, or when I read it on a card, it always brings me great joy.

What are some of the names you carry that fill you with pride and joy?

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Water rushes over his face as John lowers Jesus into the Jordan river. Then, seconds later, he feels the pull upward, lifting him, blinking his eyes clear he sees the sky bright, new, alive. It's almost as if it is opening, as if the Spirit of God is descending like a dove right into that moment. Then a voice breaks through for all to hear: "This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

It is strange shift that we find ourselves in as a church each year on the Second Sunday of Epiphany. Just 21 days ago we were celebrating the birth of Jesus, last week Magi showed up and gave their presents, and now the lectionary jumps us ahead to the 30 something year old Jesus being baptized. But where we have jumped to is really where the Gospels truly

begin. It is from the waters of baptism where Jesus is named that his ministry will begin.

“You are my child, the beloved, you bring me great joy.” These names given to Jesus at his baptism will be the fuel of Jesus’ love and compassion that leads him to embracing the outcasts, criticising the unjust, leading all to lives of love, wholeness, and justice, and reminding all that God is abundantly present in all creation. This identity will give him strength to risk it all in the name of God’s dream for the world.

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We all carry names in our lives. There are the names that bring us strength, comfort, energy, names that remind us of the good things in life. I’m uncle Tall, a husband, a minister, a gentle and kind person. But there are other names, many of us know them, that have been thrown on us or that we have burdened ourselves with. These other names are like a punch to the gut – they rob us of our breath and our energy. We know the names: fat, stupid, skinny, dumb, untrustworthy, useless, freak, geek... and the list goes on and on. Most of us know all too well that the saying “sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me” – well, it’s not true. Names can hurt us, they can linger long within our minds, they can continue to taunt us and the pain they cause can linger for a long time.

I know there are times in my life where these destructive names have been thrown at me, or that I have burdened myself with these names. There are times I have been called, and have called myself dumb, or fat, weird, that I have been made to feel awkward because of my height.

The destructive names tell us that we don't belong, we are not good enough, that we need to hide a piece of our self away – because maybe, the names taunt, we are not fully lovable.

And these names can take us into destructive places, robbing us of our full potential, hiding our beautiful self away, even leading to wanting to check out or turn on, give into escapism, addiction, or depression – finding ways to feel something else or to feel numb.

Have you ever felt the burden of these heavy names? You don't need to say them aloud, but think of the destructive names you have been burdened with and carry within yourself.

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“This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” These words are powerful political and theological statements about who Jesus is, but what is really amazing is what happens next. Jesus takes these holy names and gifts them to others. These words will be silently spoken in moments of healing when those who are labelled as “unclean” and cast out of their community by others are embraced. He will share them as he breaks bread and drinks wine with those who are named with the destructive names of sinner and worthless. He will give these names to those who are grieving, aching, and longing, when he offers them words of blessing.

Our faith boldly proclaims that all people and all of creation are given the deeply sacred and powerful names: Children of God, beloved of God, one who makes God happy. We hold these holy names within the very depth of

our being. And there is nothing that can remove them. There is nothing in our past or present, no action, no thought, no inaction, no missed opportunities, no grief, no anger, no change in health or ability, no cruel words spoken to us that can smudge out these sacred names in us.

You are a child of God. You are God's beloved. God is very pleased with you. I am a child of God. I am God's beloved. God is very pleased with me. All people we see, all bits of Creation we encounter are children of God, are God's beloved, are pleasing to God.

We are all part of a holy blessing that fills the universe, that flows through all things. We are all worthy of love and acceptance, and capable of loving and embracing. This is our true name and our calling.

But while nothing can remove the sacred name we hold we can forget it. It can get lost in the business or routines of life, drowned out by the negative tracts that can loop in our brain proclaiming "you are not good enough, smart enough, young enough, old enough...fill in the blank." It can be easy to get bogged down in the mistakes we have made, the wrongs we have done, the brokenness we live, or the grief we encounter, that we can start to believe "well this holy name certainly cannot belong to me." We can forget who we are. And that why we need to hear the words again and again spoken to us: "You are God's Child, God's beloved, and God is very pleased with you. You are worthy of love and you are loving. You are part of a holy blessing."

This morning with our bulletin we were given a little piece of paper that reads “I am God’s beloved.” I invite you to place this little strip of paper somewhere you can see it each day, a place where you need these words the most. Maybe it’s on that mirror that you look at each day and judge yourself with. Maybe it’s in your wallet where you pull out the cash or cards to buy something to help try to make yourself feel better. Maybe it’s in your car where you rush between home, work, errands, and driving your family around. Maybe you need to take a photo of this piece of paper and make it the screen cover on your phone or tablet. Maybe you need it by your phone so that you can find the strength to make that phone call to reach out for the support you need, that call to a doctor, a counsellor, AA, Alanon, your minister, a debt counsellor, a friend. You know the place where you need to remember your holy name.

The names we carry are powerful – they can empower us or limit us. When we remember the holy name that we carry, we find the strength and encouragement to take our place within the blessing that is flowing through all creation. We find the courage to live life fully and to work towards healing and justice for all. We find out what it means to be disciples, fully human, fully alive. So come, let us hear the words spoken to us: “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased” and may we know that we are part of a holy story. Amen. Let it be so.