

Kirby Lawrence Hill Abington Presbyterian Church

January 13, 2019 Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-22

EVERYONE WHO IS CALLED BY MY NAME

A bit of initiation and hazing on college campuses was not uncommon back years ago when I had my first encounters with higher education. On the day I moved into one of the freshmen dorms, I received a goofy looking hat – it was called a ‘slime cap.’ My name and the word ‘slime’ were written on the bill that was turned up. That first evening after the parents had left, all the freshmen men were told to put on their slime caps and gather in a particular place on campus. There we were met by kind representatives of the sophomore class who must have been told that there were some in my class who were hearing impaired because each time they addressed us, it was at the top of their voices. They would be the ones to graciously teach us what was where on campus by directing us first to run to the women’s dorm on the north side of campus, where we would kneel down and sing to the coeds there. Then the slime were not told to ooze, but to run to a particular statue on the south side of campus, where we would kneel and sing to it. Then we would be directed to run back to the west side of campus to sing at another women’s dorm over there. You get the idea. Those helpful sophomores really knew how to get us to learn our way around campus, even in the dark. As the night wore on, those of us ‘slime’ who lived in the dorm with the earliest curfew, realized it was about to be time for us to get back to our new home. But we told one another, “Oh, we’re fulfilling a campus tradition. They won’t lock us out this first night.” Wrong! There I was, part of a long line of ‘slime’ signing in one-by-one with a warning from the dorm security that repeated violations of curfew would lead to the need to meet with the dean of students. Hot, sweaty, tired, and locked out, I sort of felt like what my silly hat said I was.

Unless we go by a nickname of our own choosing, someone else normally gets to name us. Names may be chosen because of the meaning of the name or to honor a family member. Some families want all the children’s names to start with the same letter, or to be distinctive or distinguished sounding. But there are some names for individuals or groups of people that are chosen for a denigrating purpose. Being

referred to as 'slime' for a short period of time in a college campus game is by no means comparable to having enraged epithets hurled at people for much of their lives. I grew up in a time and place where ethnic and homophobic slurs were not uncommon. I have known people whose self-image was damaged by relentless, hateful name-calling making reference to their appearance or personality. There have been other children who were repeatedly told they were no good at a particular subject or that they could not and should not sing, whose very identity took on the limitations of those low expectations. These people need to be told that just because it is said doesn't make it true. And yet, when someone is repeatedly identified in a negative way, their very sense of who they are can be damaged.

Or if they have gone through a very difficult time, they can even come to the point that they believe that God does not value them. It was right at the time when many of the Hebrew people were in exile in far-off land of Babylon that God speaks to them through Isaiah saying, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine." In speaking of this kind of belonging, it is not a relationship of a slave belonging to a master. Isaiah goes on: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." This is more than just a cosmic connection with the Creator of all - the text is almost shockingly intimate. The God who created and loved them would also then deliver them from their time of captivity. Who were they? They were God's beloved. There may have been some people who looked at the denigrating situation in which the Hebrews found themselves and told them they couldn't be God's beloved. Just because someone told them they were not, didn't make it true. But when God says someone is loved, it is true.

In the Gospel of Luke, we are told Jesus was baptized, but there is no real description of the event. However, right after he is baptized, God calls Jesus "my beloved." There are some traditions that refer to baptism, particularly when an infant is involved, as a christening. To christen is the act of naming when baptizing someone. The child is given a Christian name. When we are baptized, we are given a name of Christ - it is the name 'God's beloved.' The great reformer, Martin Luther, was someone who throughout his life was filled with a sense of unworthiness that bordered on despair. So he kept an inscription over his desk that said, "Remember, you have been baptized." He would touch his head and say out

loud, “Martin, you have been baptized.”¹ When heaven itself says we are God’s beloved, it makes it true.

Luke also tells us that just after Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon him. Through this baptism of water and spirit, he was now ready to begin his ministry. In the first congregation I served, there was a man named Gordon who was one of the leaders of that church. He was an example of all that was good, decent, and helpful. His generous heart and courageous commitments helped chart the path for that congregation. But, he freely admitted that he had not always been that way. He said, “As a young man, I was always looking for trouble, and if the trouble were really bad, I’d look for it twice. But then,” he continued, “I met Louise, a kind, strong, wonderful young woman who loved me no matter how big a scoundrel I was. And little by little, because I wanted to live up to her love, I became less and less of a scoundrel. Finally, we married, and I’ve spent my whole life trying to make her as happy as she made me.” Then he said this: “The truth is, Louise loved me into loving.”

When we were baptized, we were named by someone else. It was said in such a way that it was and is true. We were named “God’s beloved.” As those who would never be locked out of God’s deep love, we find ourselves shaped by that reality. We find ourselves by God’s grace increasingly able to reflect God’s love to others, particularly to those who may have been shaped by dreadfully horrible names or experiences. God loves us into loving.

I want you to imagine that you are wearing a hat. Written on that hat is every hateful, denigrating name you have ever been called by yourself or by others. There is pain in wearing such a hat. Just because someone says something doesn’t make it true, but that doesn’t mean it is not painful. Now I am going to ask you to reach up, literally reach up, and take off that slime cap. It does not define you. It does not identify you. Instead, the baptismal waters that touched your head are what give each one of us our valued identity. Look around you – you are surrounded by God’s beloved. The next time you look in a mirror, say to yourself, “I am one of God’s beloved children.” Just because a preacher says it, doesn’t mean it is true. But when God says it in the waters of baptism, it is true. God loves you and wants to love you into loving. Alleluia!

¹ From a sermon by Joanna Adams, found at: http://day1.org/1678-god_believes_in_you