

The way we *speak* about God says a lot about what we *believe* about God / how we *see* God. Even more important, is the way God chooses to *speak* of us—it tells us what God *believes* about us... how God *sees* us.

In Psalm 8, the psalmist ponders: “*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.*”

It is astonishing that God, the Creator of the universe, should put so much attention on us. And yet, Jesus tells us that God knows each of us intimately—down to the number of hairs on our heads (which is, I guess, more impressive for some of us than for others...).

God knows us—deeply and completely—the good... the bad... and everything in between. Yet God claims us... and God names us... and God loves us...

“I have called you by name,” God said to the people of Israel, *“YOU are mine. You are precious... I love you... I am with you.”*

“YOU are my Son, the Beloved,” God said to Jesus at his baptism. *“I am pleased with you.”*

“Beloved Child” God says to us at our baptism, *“I claim you as my own. YOU are mine. I am with you always.”*

Powerful words... of identity... of promise...

To name someone is to exercise power over their lives—power for good... *or* for ill. Just think about the positive, forming and shaping effect it has to pronounce a “good name” on someone...

To say to a child, *“what a good boy/girl you are”*... *“you’re so smart / talented”*... *“what a gift / blessing you are”*... *“my beloved son/daughter”*—these words have power.

We affirm people... we use positive words to describe them... we expect the best from them... and that becomes both, what they think of themselves... *and* what they become. There is real power in that.

It’s why most of us are careful to use positive words in our homes and work places—words that build up instead of tear down: *“great job”*... *“you are a true friend”*... *“you’re such a good helper”*... *“you’re an important / valued member of this team”*...

Of course, it works the other way as well—when we say negative things to people: *“you’re no good”*... *“you’ll never amount to anything”*... *“you’re worthless / stupid”*... *“you’re fat / ugly”*... *“you’re a fool”*—here, too, these words / ‘names’ becomes part of what shapes the person. I guess we shouldn’t be surprised if people sink to our lowest expectation of them.

Naming people is an act of shaping them, like clay in the hands of a potter. Which means it is within our control to help people become the finest vessels they can be.

God created us, humans—from the dirt of the earth (according to Genesis)—“*we are dust and to dust we shall return.*” We are, all of us, “clay”—waiting to be shaped and formed by the great Potter... the Creator... our loving God and Father.

One of the ways God shapes us is by what God names us. What God chooses to call us has a strong effect on who we are... on who we become. I mean, if there is power for a parent / teacher to name and shape a child, how much more is there power for God, the Creator, to name and shape what God has made?!

Consider the words / the ‘names’ that God *could* call us—if God chose to name us by our thoughts, words, or actions: sinner... selfish / self-centered... unrighteous... unworthy...

Yes, God *could* call us these “names”... and God would be right, because these are *who* we are. In fact, when we confess our sins to God, this is precisely what we call ourselves:

- “*I am a sinner*” – we say... “I am captive to sin and I can’t free myself”.
- “*I am unworthy*”—we say... “I have sinned against you in every possible way, God—in thought, word, and deed...”

These are powerful words... part of our identity / *who* we are... because they are true...

- WE ARE sinners—we have turned away from God; we do not live as God calls us to live...
- WE ARE unworthy—with plenty of selfish / hurt- and hate-filled thoughts and actions...
- WE ARE unrighteous—not loving God as we should / not tending to our relationship with God as we should... and not loving and serving the world around us as God calls us to do.

Yes, these are words / ‘names’ that *could* be used for us; BUT they are NOT the ‘names’ God chooses to use for us... because of what God has done *for us*... in Jesus.

Listen to how God spoke to the Israelites through the prophet Isaiah—people who had turned away from God / gone their own way... who were now in exile...

As punishment for Israel’s arrogance and disobedience, God had permitted Israel to be conquered by the Babylonians and thrown into exile. Before this passage, Isaiah had words of judgment for them. Now he has words of comfort and hope for them—words from God. These tender words remind them WHO they are... and WHOSE they are – despite their sin.

But now, thus says the Lord who created you, O Jacob... who formed you, O Israel. Do not fear, for I have called you by name and you are mine...

The One who created / formed them has not turned away from them. God still claims them and holds on to them. God still loves them—they are God’s beloved. God will not let the rivers overwhelm them or the flames to consume them...

This passage is paired with Jesus’ baptism... because in the waters of baptism, we understand that God marks us and claims us as God’s children... in the waters of baptism, God seals God’s love for us – no matter what we might have done or what might happen... in the waters of baptism, God gives tangible evidence of what God says to Jesus: “YOU are my [child], the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Dear friends, we bear the very name of Christ... God's beloved Son... the One sent to save us from who we might otherwise be / become. The name that has been conferred on us is "***beloved child of God***"... even ***friend***, Jesus calls us and names us. And because that is what we are named by God (the names we claim for ourselves), that is *who* we become (by the power of the Holy Spirit)...

...more and more, each day, becoming the persons God has created us to be / the people God has called us to be... more and more like the Christ whose name we bear...

...less and less like the names we know are still true of us—the names we confess before God, as we ask for forgiveness...less and less shaped by their negative power...

When God names us, we are made new... reborn... reshaped... reformed into the very image of God, our Creator and Lord and Savior. That's what the Spirit does!

Reborn... reshaped... reformed—through the gift of a name... a new identity... a purpose...

Hear, again, those words of Luke: *Now when all were baptized, and when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "YOU are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased."*

This voice from heaven names Jesus... affirms Jesus' true identity. But with this confirmation of his identity, there is also a foreshadowing of Jesus' vocation—how he will live this identity out. The beginning part, "*You are my Son, the Beloved*" comes from Psalm 2:7—a royal psalm that was used at the coronation of Israel's kings. The second part comes from Isaiah 42:1—one of several prophecies that foretell God's saving activity through a servant who suffers on behalf of the people.

Even at his baptism, Jesus—God's Son... the Messiah... our Savior... comes under the shadow of the cross. The voice from heaven is, both, a wonderful affirmation of Jesus/ his vocation... *and* a reminder of where it is to lead.

When we were baptized, God named us ***beloved child of God***... and claimed us as God's own.

- What does this say about our true identity... who we really are?
- What difference does this make? Does it make a difference?

In baptism, we were given the name of the One into whom we were baptized: Jesus Christ. It is Christ's very name we claim—even though we continue to confess those other names that reveal our broken humanity / our sin. Both at the same time—sinner and saint... unworthy and worthy... unrighteous and righteous—we say.

But sinner / unworthy / unrighteous—though it is *who we are*... is NOT what we are called—NOT by God. And it is NOT who we will become. Through the love of God in Christ Jesus—because of Christ's death and resurrection—we are seen in His light: ***righteous, like Christ***, Paul calls us... ***beloved sons and daughters***, God calls us...

We bear Christ's name. HIS is the name that transforms us!

A friend of mine decided to put one of those Christian fish symbols on the back of her car. I was surprised because I knew she hated bumper stickers on her car. She said she wanted to put the symbol of Jesus on her car to keep her from making rude hand gestures, etc. when someone cut her off in traffic. I guess that's a step in the right direction.

My friends, *when* you are among God's baptized, then this is WHO you *are*!

Every time we wash with water... it is an opportunity to remember our baptism and the promises God made to us in it. Though conducted only once, baptism was never intended to be a once-and-done event... BUT rather something to remember and renew every day.

"I am God's beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world." -- Get in the habit of saying this when you shower / wash your face or hands each day!

Baptized in the name of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... sealed with the Holy spirit and marked with the cross of Christ—the One who came to be with us... and who was baptized "with the people" so that we might be cleansed through him... and who died on our behalf—this is *who* you *are*... this is your identity: ***Beloved son / daughter of God... Sister / brother in Christ... God's very own...*** There is power in these names!

Let these names save you... shape you... and move you to action. Amen.