

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### **What's in a Name?**

*Scripture: Mark 1:9-11*

Richard Jensen, a Lutheran theologian, shares this account in his book *Thinking in Story*: "My friend Fran Burnford told me a wonderful story about her grandson. His name is Adam. He's now six years old. One day Adam and his mother were driving to church. As they were driving Adam said: 'I was baptized five years ago in 1985. My Grandmother Fran and I think about that a lot.' One of the things Grandma Fran does when she sees Adam is to make the sign of the cross on his forehead to remind him of who he is. The sign of the cross was made on Adam's forehead when he was baptized. 'Adam, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.' That's what the pastor said when Adam was baptized. Adam knows that. When he draws pictures of himself to send to Grandma Fran he puts a cross on his forehead. Adam knows who he is. He knows himself to be a child of God. He has received his identity from God. He has an identity that no power can take away from him."

I love baptisms. They have a way of claiming us. They have a way to giving us an identity. Adam's baptism gives him a sense of identity that will forever shape how he views God and how he views others and even how he views himself. God has claimed Adam as his own. How wonderful it is to serve a God who loves us enough to claim us as his own.

Burt Reynolds said, "There's a saying in the South that no man is a man until his father tells him he is." We also seek that type of affirmation, an affirmation that we are accepted and loved. Baptism is a mark of God's acceptance of us, even before we understand what that acceptance means. However, baptism is an outward sign of an inward change. It is a visible sign, a sign of significance to the one being baptized, but more importantly, it is sign to others that we are claimed and loved by God. I want to share with you one of the most amazing stories of God's claiming. It is one of the most beautiful pictures of what baptism is all about.

There was once a man named John. Now, John wasn't really the type of guy you wanted to invite over to your mother's house for dinner. John was dirty and rough and unemployed. He lived alone far way from everyone else. He didn't shave and his full beard wasn't trimmed and his hair was wild. He didn't have lavish garments. Instead, all he had was an outfit made from extremely coarse fabric that irritated his skin and sometimes rubbed it raw. He was a wild man of sorts, living off what he found in nature, frequently eating bugs. He had nothing except a firm faith in God. John would stand just outside a nearby city and he would preach to the people traveling on the road. He would tell them that they needed to return to God. He would tell them of their great sin and of their need for forgiveness from God. He would tell them that they needed to return to the God who loved them. Then John would call for people to join him at the nearby river, and he would baptize them.

"At this time," Mark tells us, "Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by

John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: 'You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.'

I love the story of Jesus' baptism. It's so simple, yet so descriptive. There's John, a man who isn't much to look at, whose appearance and lifestyle don't scream "look at me, I'm wonderful." Then there's Jesus, a man who will change the world with his teaching and healing, his life and his death, a man who comes down the Jordan River to be baptized, an act of humility and submission.

In recent years, the Jordan River has narrowed as water is diverted for crops and animals. It has also become dirtier as more people use it as a dumping ground and as it is exposed to greater amounts of field runoff. The Jordan River isn't all that amazing as a river to look at, but the Jordan River was never a terribly wide or overly impressive river. It was a simple river, a lush oasis surrounded by miles of dry land. However, it is in this simple, unimpressive place that Jesus comes to begin his ministry. It is at this place that we hear of God's awe-inspiring announcement, naming Jesus his son for the entire world to hear.

What really captivates me about this story is that it seems so unnecessary. When Jesus was born, angels sang his praises. Wise men and shepherds came to see him. I'm sure his mother couldn't have kept the stories from him if she wanted to. Everyone on the block was probably talking about it for years to come. And then there's Jesus as a young boy sitting in the temple because he was to be about his father's work. Jesus knew who he was. Jesus knew he was God's child. He knew that God had claimed him. Yet, we have this huge production at his baptism. There's the spirit of God taking the form of a dove and there's a voice calling from heaven. Why? It's certainly not for Jesus' sake. Jesus knew who he was. So we must assume that it is for those who are around him, those who are witnessing the event. It is so those around him might know that he has been claimed and is loved by God. God is naming him his son.

Isn't that part of what happens in the baptisms we participate in today? Anne or Danny or I may be placing water on a child's head, but baptism isn't an act that we do. Baptism is an act of God. Through baptism God announces to the world that this is a child who is loved and claimed in the grace of God, a child who is part of God's family. God names that child his son or daughter. In baptism, parents and godparents and those in the church pledge to raise their children in the church, teaching them the life-changing stories and message of God, but God is saying this one is mine...don't ever forget that. That's what's happening in Jesus' baptism. God is declaring to all the world that Jesus is his son. And that should change how people approach Jesus and should draw those in God's family closer to him.

But you and I aren't Jesus. We didn't have angels announcing our births. We don't always remember who we are. We don't always remember our baptisms and remember that God has claimed us. Sometimes we forget that God has named us as his own son or daughter. So our baptism is a physical sign for us as well. Just like Grandma Fran's grandson Adam, we need a reminder that we are God's and that we are loved. That's part of what baptism does for us. It reminds us who we are and what we should be about. Baptism was the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It was from this point that Jesus began going out and telling others about God's love

and salvation. Baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' spreading of the Good News. So it should be with us. Our baptism is God's claim on us that we are his, it is his extending the name son or daughter to us. Every time we participate in a baptism, we should be reminded of that claim on our life, a claim that requires a response, a response to be in ministry, just like Jesus, telling of God's love and salvation.

Fred Craddock, preacher and wonderful storyteller, tells about ministering in a little community in southwest Oklahoma for about three years. The population was about 450 on a good day, says Craddock. There were four churches; a Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church. Each had its share of the population, and on Wednesday nights and Sundays, each church had a small collection of people.

The attendance rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat. But the best and most consistent attendance in town was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs and the hail and the wind and whether or not they were going to have a crop, while their wives and sons and daughters were in one of the four churches. The churches had good attendance and poor attendance, but that little café consistently had good attendance. Once in a while they would lose a member in the café because the wife finally got to him or maybe the kids did. And he would go off sheepishly to one of the churches. But the men at the café felt they had the biggest and strongest group in town and so they met on Wednesdays and Sundays and every other day to discuss the cattle and the weather and such. They were not bad men; they were good men, family men, hard working men.

The patron saint of the group was a man named Frank. Frank was seventy-seven years old when Craddock met him—a strong man, a pioneer, a farmer, a rancher and a cattleman. He had been born in a sod house and had prospered. He had his credentials and all the men at the café looked up to him as their patron saint. And they said, “Old Frank will never go to church, why should I?”

One day Craddock met Frank on the street and they shook hands and visited for awhile. Frank took the offensive immediately. Craddock said nothing about coming to church, he was just visiting, but Frank said, “I work hard and take care of my family and I mind my own business” and as far as he was concerned that was what mattered. He was telling Craddock, “just leave me alone; I’m not a prospect.”

So Craddock didn’t bother Frank; he left him alone. Then one day Frank surprised him and surprised all the men at the café who were completely bewildered, when he showed up at church, seventy-seven years old, wanting to be baptized. Craddock did baptize him. Some speculated that Frank was sick and that he must be scared about meeting his maker. Some said he had heart trouble. “Old Frank would never get baptized, but when you think you are going to die, well people get scared.” There were all kinds of rumors and all kinds of stories. A little later, after his baptism Craddock asked him, “Frank, do you remember what you told me, “I work hard, take care of my family, mind my own business.” Frank said “Yea, I remember.” “Do you still say that?” Frank said, “Yes, I still say that.” “Then what’s the difference now that you're baptized.” And old Frank said, “Well, then I didn’t know what my business was; but now I

know."

There's a popular song out that I think sums up baptism very well. Baptism is God washing away who we think we are and naming us as his own. In other words God calls us to be who we are created to be. The words of this song were not written with a Christian audience in mind. But they do accurately describe the change that takes place as we begin living into our baptism.

I've always been the kind of girl that hid my face,  
So afraid to tell the world what I've got to say.  
But I had this dream right inside of me,  
I'm gonna let it show, it's time to let you know, to let you know.

This is real, this is me,  
I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be now,  
Gonna let the light shine on me.  
Now I've found who I am, there's no way to hold it in,  
No more hiding who I wanna be, this is me.

You're the voice I hear inside my head, the reason that I'm singing,  
I need to find you, I gotta find you.  
You're the missing piece I need, this song inside of me,  
I need to find you, I gotta find you.

This is real, this is me,  
I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be now,  
Gonna let the light shine on me.  
Now I found who I am, there's no way to hold it in,  
No more hiding who I wanna be.

This is me.  
This is me.

Baptism is a reminder of who you are and who you are called to be. As God shapes you and as you allow yourself to be changed, as you live into your baptism there's no way you can hold in who God has called you to be. God has named you his son or his daughter, so live into that calling, a calling of ministry, a calling of love, a calling that requires responsibility to his message of salvation, a responsibility to your brothers and sisters around you, a responsibility to his church. God has claimed you as his own, so begin living into that name: Child of God.