

Scripture: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sermon Title: "Name: Beloved"

Rev. Josh Fitterling

What do names look like? I know this sounds like a really odd question but I bet that most of you know exactly what I'm talking about when I say that some people look like their names. I mean, have you ever been introduced to someone, and as you look at them and you hear their name for the very first time you find yourself thinking or even saying, "Well you don't look like a [Insert any name here] – Bob, Karen, Sue". Maybe you even say to yourself something like, "They don't look like a Michael. No, I think they look more like a Mitch." I actually remember feeling this way about myself when I was in elementary school, I thought that I didn't really look like a Josh. After all, the only other two Josh's I knew in my grade were nothing like me from looks, to personality, and so on. So I felt that the name didn't quite fit me. At that time, I thought my middle name Michael was a better fit! Anyway, many of us have these preconceived notions of what someone should look like based on their name or what name someone should have based on their looks.

This is such an intriguing topic in fact that back in 2017, there was actually a study, albeit a small study, done around this very idea that many people look like their name. The experiment was done like this. Each participant was shown a series of headshots of people and presented with 4 names to choose from. Since there is no other information about each person, the probability of guessing a name correctly in this scenario would be 25%. However, when this experiment was conducted in Israel with 70 participants, it was seen that they guessed correctly 30% of the time. I know, not a huge difference but certainly higher than the probability would suggest. Then when the study was done again in France with 115 participants, they had a success rate of 40% (a bit more impressive!) These studies also suggested that certain names are easier to guess. In Israel, participants could guess correctly a person named Tom more than 52% of the time. And in France, participants could guess correctly a person named Veronique

nearly 80% of the time! So it does seem, that based on our own stereotypes of what someone with a given name should look like, there is an increased probability of guessing a name correctly.

Still, there is one name that we can guess correctly 100% of the time. That name is Beloved. In our scripture reading today from the Gospel of Luke, as we hear once again about the baptism of Jesus, we too hear the voice of God naming Jesus as God's beloved son. Naming Jesus as Beloved. A name which is bestowed too upon us all - we each bear the name beloved. For in the Christian faith, the waters of baptism are an eternal reminder to us all of our identity as God's beloved children. We are reminded of our beloved-ness every Sunday when we hear those words of assurance which are a reminder of God's love and grace - a grace which is beyond words. When we just think of the gift of Jesus we celebrate each Christmas and every Sunday for that matter, we realize again and again how much God loves us and the world. All of these things remind us that we too and all people are named Beloved - a name which has been there from our very beginning!

Yes, the name Beloved should be one that, even though we may not greet others on a regular basis by that name, it should still be one that we never forget when greeting another. And yes, this is certainly easier when we think about the people we like in our world, but the title of beloved bestowed by God is not simply given to those who look like us, believe like us, think like us, or share other similarities with us. The gift of this name Beloved knows no earthly bounds. When we look at someone with whom we disagree or whom we may even call an enemy and are reminded that they too are much loved in the eyes of God, how can we not approach them with some level of compassion? How much more cordial and caring would we be? How much more time would we spend listening to others and treating them with respect if we remembered first that they are named Beloved above all else?

And the beautiful part of naming others as Beloved by how we treat them, is remembering where it leads. For Jesus, it launched him into a ministry of love and light

which would powerfully impact the world then, now, and forever. When we too name those around us as beloved through our words and our actions, we send them forward in life in that same love and light. When we ourselves are shown care and compassion and in that reminded of the claim on our lives as God's beloved, it has the power to change us too. This past week, I was blessed by the many people around me showing care and compassion after my fall and the mild concussion. In that it truly reminded me of that name beloved. From those who called or emailed to check in - word sure traveled fast when you get messages from folks out of state! There were others who scolded me for driving myself to the ER and those who saw me working when I should have been resting and told me to go home. I got many reminders from my partner and many others to take it easy and rest my brain which is good medicine for recovery. While I was stressing the mild part of the diagnosis and trying to just continue as normal, others showed love by caring for the concussion. Looking back, all of these acts reminded me of this name that we all have: beloved and I am grateful for all the reminders of this name that I received over the last week. What a blessing it is!

Beloved People of God, when we look at those around us and when we look at people all around the world, we may not be able to guess their first name all the time with remarkable accuracy, but we can always remember their name which is Beloved. A name which is silent but powerful. A name which we utter rarely but will forever effect how we treat and care for those around us. For when we see others as God's beloved, how could we willingly harm them? How could we not want to help? How could we not want to love them into wholeness? For they bear the same name as we do. A name given by God. And when we remember again and again that our name too is beloved, how much more will we love ourselves and treat ourselves with respect and care. So as we go forth today, may we remember our beloved-ness, and may we treat those around us with compassion and love for they too are named beloved. So be it and may it be so. Amen.