

“Named and Claimed by God”
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church

Matthew 14:13-21.

As children, we sometimes take on identity traits given to us by others, even when they are negative or unhealthy for us. We allow certain experiences to shape how we behave in relationship to others.

The second grade marked a new chapter in my life: I could finally play with the other kids at recess! I had been recovering from heart surgery that fixed a birth defect and was not allowed to run around like my small but growing body wanted. So the first chance I got, I was outside on the playground playing tag with everyone else. I knew the rules: get tagged, you are “it”, then you run around trying to tag someone else so they can be “it.” No tag backs!

So I was “it,” and I set my targets on a girl named Greta. I chased her onto the playground, across a bridge to the edge of a platform where I could *just* reach out and tag her – on the back as she fell face first onto the mulch below. As she stood up, our teacher Miss Crawford and all the students circled around her to witness her recovery.

Instead of crying, she was angry. She wanted to know who pushed her off that platform so she could make it even! I don’t know how everyone missed that it was me (or who didn’t tell), but I was way too terrified to claim my folly, much less say that I was sorry. That was the last time I dared get close to Greta to this very day.

Can you think of a time in your life when you needed to seek forgiveness from someone else? Many of us have been hurt so deeply by our friends or relatives, and we have hurt others as well. Sometimes our fragile relationships seem too broken to ever put back together.

In the scripture reading this morning, we find Jacob at the river Jabbok in anticipation of confronting his brother, Esau, who he has been running from for most of his adult life. At a younger age, Jacob tricked his brother out of this amazing inheritance – to receive the blessing of covenant with God initiated with his grandfather Abraham. In this covenant, God promised **Jacob**, not Esau, would have descendants numbering like the dust of the earth spreading in all directions, becoming residents where he was now an alien and being a blessing to every family on earth.

Jacob is forced to escape back to Canaan because his father-in-law Laban chases him out of his land for demonstrating the same self-serving trickster behavior when working for his new extended family. And God tells him, “Enough is enough. Trickery may have worked for you when you were younger, but this is not the person I created you to be.” So God calls him back to

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the land of Canaan to confront his actions for the first time by meeting his brother. And, God says, "I will be with you."

Jacob's initial strategy for confronting Esau is to put together a series of huge gifts from his wealth of livestock to pacify his brother as he enters his territory. It is during the last anxious moments before crossing into Canaan to meet his brother that **God** confronts Jacob. Under the cover of darkness, at the banks of the Jabbok River in the freshly trampled soil where his family, servants and livestock had already passed, Jacob wrestles with God in the form of a man. Covered in sand, river water and sweat, Jacob presses his powerful body into his opponent fighting out of fear and fighting for survival. For every move there is a counter move, until Jacob makes it clear that he won't give up until he receives a blessing for what he may encounter on the other side of that rushing river. God responds by asking, "What is your name?"

It may seem like a simple question, but for Jacob it becomes a kind of confession. The name Jacob is said to mean "trickster or supplanter," the very element of Jacob's character that caused the division with his brother. Answering God's question demands that Jacob become vulnerable and open, and without a moment's hesitation he answers, "Jacob: My name is trickster. I am a con-man." In that moment, by confronting who he really is, Jacob gives up control of his identity – He gives up his comfortable way of acting in the world, the power he knows how to use to get what he wants. He gives it to God.

God has a new plan for Jacob that is constituted through his new name. Biblical scholar Paul Vrolijk says, "Jacob's opponent takes Jacob's name and relegates it to the past, giving Jacob a new destiny: Israel." This only happened because Jacob relinquished the power in his name and accepted the subservient position of receiving a new name from God.

We do this very same wrestling in our own lives, and we ritualize it in the practice of confession. Each week, we come before God - at the beginning of our worship service - to name our sins. We confess to God the parts of our identity that we know do not fit into God's kingdom. We confess to God the parts of our identity that are susceptible to the powers of this world - greed, desire, hate, fear. We identify how our identities are used in societal systems to promote oppression, violence, and exploitation against our own wishes and convictions. We name the ways that the image of God in us is violated in our daily lives.

We don't name our participation in personal and corporate sin as a way to establish guilt or reinforce our brokenness and limitations. We name ourselves in confession, just like Jacob, to give away our human authority and power - accepting God's power and authority over us. As Christians, this act of subservience to God allows God to reaffirm God's name for us. God names and claims us as God's own. We are the children of God. We are elder, teacher, caretaker, prophet, and **child** of God. We are God's beloved.

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As Presbyterians in the Reformed tradition, we have a book of confessions - not to simply name our sins, but to confess what we believe: That Jesus is Lord; that God is a God of Grace; that Jesus came to teach us the Way, the Truth, and the Life; that the Holy Spirit is with us to empower us to live out and establish the kingdom of God. We confess that there is sin and suffering in the world that God calls us to overcome. We confess that our power does not come from our human bodies, but from the love and grace of God. We confess what the Prophet Isaiah said to the kings of Israel, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

When we confess to God our most personal name and identity, we must really wrestle with God alone in the trampled soil at the edge of a new beginning. Like Jacob, crossing back over into the promised land, we must wrestle with God to leave our broken identity in the past. To step into God's kingdom, we cannot be defined by our sins or our suffering. We can name these experiences that have come to define us and in turn give them over to God.

Instead of hiding in shame of my childhood push that left Greta falling to the mulch, I can name this act in my relationship with her - not as a defining characteristic, but as a moment to be mourned.

This experience of naming is often painful. It requires the capacity to mourn what we have lost and grieve the suffering we have caused for others. We must be able to name the experiences of our own oppression so that they no longer have power over us. We give them to God in confession to allow the power of the divine to hold us up in our act of becoming disciples of Christ. God names and claims us, and this is where our power comes from.

When we meet Jesus in our scripture lesson today, he is in need of some time alone with God to wrestle with the news he just received - John the Baptist is dead, killed at the hands of King Herod because John the Baptist had dared to name Herod an adulteress. The one who had personally baptized Jesus, making a way in the wilderness for Jesus' ministry - this cousin and friend - has been murdered by the state for naming the sins of those in power.

John was speaking out against Herod's affair with his cousin and sister-in-law Herodias. Herod and Herodias did not want to be named publicly as sinners, so eventually Herod forgot about public opinion and had John's head served on a platter to Herodias - returning only his body to be mourned by John's followers.

Verse 13 says, "Now when Jesus heard this [about John the Baptist], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What might the Son of man - God made flesh - do when hearing such horrific and sorrowful news? The writer of Matthew tells us that Jesus removed himself from his ministry, taking a boat to be by himself. Certainly, it is a regular practice of

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Jesus to take some alone time in prayer with God when the task of ministry becomes too burdensome or Jesus needs to mourn. Perhaps he also needed some alone time to wrestle with God about his own name. Could he really be called Jesus, son of man, when the reality of the Roman Empire's violent power was so disturbingly flaunted at him in the death of his friend? It could not be made any clearer that Herod's next victim would be Jesus himself. Continuing in his ministry to "bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recover sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free" would surely lead to Jesus' own death as well. These acts of ministry not only nourish and nurture the oppressed but also name the sins of those who have benefitted from their oppression. Healing the sick was a deeply political act of love that did not go unnoticed by those in power.

There may have been more on Jesus mind in his moments alone in that boat than just grief. But Jesus was not the only one who heard the news about John the Baptist that day. The "crowds" also heard about John's fate that day, but instead of seeking alone time with God in a deserted place, the people from every town along the way sought out time with God in Jesus who happened to be in a deserted place. Instead of demanding silence or solitude in his time of grief, Jesus recognized that same grief in his followers. Jesus also remembered his name, given to him during his baptism by God who said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus had an identity in God. Jesus could identify as both God and human being. In knowing his own name, Jesus was able to identify with his crowds and seek them out to minister to their needs. Jesus healed the sick in his moment of vulnerable mourning with God. This was his identity - his calling.

Of course, the story does not end there. This is merely the context for one of the most well known miracles in Jesus ministry. Crowds from all the surrounding towns had followed Jesus out into the wilderness along the beach and tall grass, and now it was starting to get dark. Men, women and children - entire families - had walked for miles to be with Jesus here, and now many thousands of them - perhaps 5,000 families - were stuck out in the wilderness and getting hungry.

I can imagine the anxiety of the disciples hoping Jesus would send them home before they would be responsible for feeding this stadium sized gathering of healed followers. And just as they had feared, Jesus told them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." The disciples even had a great excuse, after making a collection, they only had five loaves and two fish to feed them all. Surely it would not be just to feed some and not others!

But without hesitation, Jesus knew what to do because he knew who he was. "He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves." In this moment of fear and anxiety, Jesus returned everyone in the crowd to a connection with God. The act of sharing a meal together was a holy act that connected all of them to their identity with God. God named each of them "My beloved," and

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after receiving Jesus ministry of healing, I'm sure many of them would be connected to that identity in new and exciting ways. Jesus celebrates this identity in another miracle - demonstrating God's abundance for all that had gathered.

"And all ate and were filled." What in the world could that mean? Is this simply a description of the capacity of some 25,000 stomachs that had been filled with bread and fish at this biblical picnic? Or could this feasting community gathered by the sorrowful news of John the Baptist's death be filled with something new. Perhaps this bread and fish provided a feeling of nourishment and completeness that we yearn for in the kingdom of God. Perhaps this healed and fed crowd felt the joy and love that comes from the healing grace of God. Perhaps this community of strangers became a family of God's children in the sharing of this meal. I know that if I were one of those little children watching Jesus break the bread and heal my outcast body, I would be forever transformed and renamed by God.

After experiencing the miraculous love of Jesus as a child, I know that the power of my childhood shame for pushing my classmate would no longer have power over me. That action would be relegated to the past, leaving ample room for me to seek forgiveness from God and establish a new relationship with the one I hurt with God's love guiding my actions.

When we hold the bread and the cup in communion, we are not simply consuming the miracle of God's spiritual presence with us. We are celebrating that we are God's children; that we are part of a global community of God's children that span millennia. We are celebrating that God has named us and claimed us, just like our ancestors on the grassy beach with Jesus. We are celebrating that as part of this community that has taken on Jesus' name, as the Body of Christ, we are called to continue the liberating works that the prophets proclaimed about our savior. We are celebrating the lives of those who have come before us to show us the way. And we are celebrating that **God is with us** as we live into our identity in Christ.

We may come to struggle with God through the sin and suffering in our lives, but when we turn our broken identities over to God, God does not simply heal us and send us home. God welcomes us in to the beloved community with a renewed identity in Christ. God celebrates us and gives us the power of the Holy Spirit to extend that beloved community to the ends of the earth.

When we relinquish our name to God - confessing our sins, let us also confess the identities that keep us shackled to sin in this world. Let us confess the ways oppression becomes internalized in our lives - that race and class and gender still have power to name us and claim us as different, unequal, and unconnected in our struggle for God's love and justice. Let us confess the ways we have become normalized to sin - that we worship today on land taken by force from many Native nations, including the Potawatomi, Miami, and Illinois who believed the land claimed ownership over them instead of them claiming ownership over the land. Whether coming here as refugee,

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runaway, pioneer or profiteer, our presence reinforces the removal of our Native siblings. The powers that have allowed for these sins is nothing compared to the power of God.

Let us confess that our God names and claims all of us as God's own. Our daily confession may not be words, but acts of love inspired by our identity in Christ. Let us live out our identity, our calling as Jesus disciples, in our hardest relationships and our deepest struggles. Let us confess that God is with us. Amen.