

For 3rd Sunday of Easter 2021; Acts 3:11-21; I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-49

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” The 12 year old was taught this by her mother. But as she stares at the screen on her phone, what she was called by the bully at school just sticks with her. She can’t get away from it. It is on the phone texts. It is on Facebook. It is in emails. Everywhere she goes, those names come at her.

Children can be cruel you say. But I think adults can as well. We imply the insults more. But the name calling is there just the same.

What are the names that you are called by – and what are the names that you call others?

That is so important.

Both the first and second lessons have something to say about names – about what you are called.

Yes, there is a great deal of power in what you are called. A child, who is constantly called stupid by the people he loves and respects, will become stupid. A child who is called loving, will become more caring. A child who is called intelligent succeeds more at school. That list could go on.

What you are called makes a difference. And so this morning I am going to talk about the names that people are called in the first and second readings – and reflect on how they speak to us. I think both lessons give us an insight in to names we might claim – or be claimed by – and what they say to us.

Peter begins his sermon by saying, “Men of Israel.” That is who they are. They are identified by a heritage.

Peter is not meaning to exclude the women and the children that were there. Yes, he does address “Men of Israel”, but it is obvious that he is really talking to ALL the people who were looking to their physical heritage. Twice the text refer to all the people before he starts to speak.

We have become so sensitive, that we hear things that were not said or meant. But Peter is meaning to address a narrow group – people who could point to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all those people of import in their ancestry.

This was the seed of how the church started – with vision of those who were most like the early disciples. Israelites...to those who were the people who heard the promise of God at that time for more than 4000 years ago and up to the time Peter was speaking.

The promises...those promises that God gave...a promise that they would be blessed to be a blessing to the whole world. But they had turned that in to themselves.

We too have a heritage to point to – it is contained in part of the name of our church – Lutheran. And so, like Peter, I could address you...People who have gathered here...you claim Luther as your heritage...hear this word.

You can point to Luther...to Melenchthon...to Katie Luther...to the Muhlenburgs in this country...and those who rediscovered that **WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH**, that wonderful teaching of the New Testament.

You too, have heard this word....so come in to God’s presence.

Again – I ask you – when you look around this morning...what do you call the people around you...fellow Lutherans...fellows who hold on to the heritage and history? And do you forget that more than half of you came from other traditions?

Those traditions also look to some of those people as part of their own history.

But the thing that got me thinking this week about what we are called is found in the second reading. There we are reminded we are called something more important than what we are called because of heritage.

You are called a Child of God, and we together are God's children. If I were to say that everyone in the world is a child of God, that does not make it so. But you are called children of God. God himself said that.

John says in this letter – you are NOW children of God. NOW...That is a change in what you are called...

Called - and so you are - children of God.

Before that took place, you were another kind of child. You were born as children of a fallen humanity. That is something that all people hold in common. That is something that is true of every human who walked the earth.

Let me put that in more common English...you do not have an intimate relationship with God when you are born. Now, you have the relationship of a child and parent.

And this last week, I was reminded of what that relationship is like. I drove to Florida, and spent time with my father – and on the way back drove some extra miles to see my son.

That is the kind of relationship you now have with God.

I want to ask you, have you ever looked at children? I mean really. Let's start with a newborn. I mean a child just out of the womb, before they are cleaned up. Try as hard as you like, a child who has just been born is not very attractive. Look at them, their head is misshaped, there is all sorts of yeast and slime all over them. They are just not very attractive. But a parent still sees the child as beautiful.

Then a day or two goes by, and the child starts to undergo huge changes. Especially if you are a parent or grandparent, you can see each change that that little wonder does. Hair starts to come. They even start to respond to sounds. There is a physical attractiveness that becomes part of the baby.

They are changing ever so slowly, and as they do, they begin to look a lot more like the people who are their mother and father. In our case - when we start to talk theologically - we have to acknowledge both that we are children of sin, and children of holiness. As we grow, we will begin to look more like one or the other.

There are two children of God that I love dearly. They are also two people that I can only be around for a short time. They are older than me, but have a mental age of about 13 or 14. The title we use for them is developmentally disabled. There are other names others call them. And yet they are children of God. Some of the people who attend church with them are uncomfortable around them, in part because of hygiene issues they have.

Yet they will be like Jesus when he comes again - as will I. Called children of God.

This is what is most important – You are NOW a child of God. And it only happens because of what Jesus did.

Again, I want you to look around you. Do you call those around you PRIMARILY children of God – or something else?

In his letters, Paul uses a different phrase to get the same idea across – he calls all of the people he writes letters to “saints”.

And like being children of God...it is not dependent on what they do – but on what God does...you only have to read the letters of Paul to understand that.

These saints...some of them were fighting, bickering...getting drunk...and all sorts of other things. They became saints because of what God did in Jesus.

And so, like the children did – I am going to ask you to remind yourself of that truth as well. If you are with someone this morning turn to them, and make the sign of the cross on their forehead and above their hearts, saying in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and then put your hand on the side of their face and say, “by this be reminded you are a child of God.”

We are encouraging you to practice social distancing, so only do this with people you came with – and so, you can also do this upon yourself today if you came alone – or at home when you are struggling – that is what Martin Luther did as well – whenever he was questioning the grace of God.

There is a final thought I would like to leave you with this morning. When Jesus met someone, he looked at them as either someone who was a child of God, or who had the possibility of being a child of God. That is to say each person he came into contact with, he believed was significant in God's eyes.

I am sure that you have heard the long list of people that Jesus associated with - those who were thieves, prostitutes, sick with diseases that made them repulsive to most of the rest of the world. He met with foreigners - who didn't talk right.

He threw out all of those labels that we are so happy to make. He threw them out, because instead of producing understanding, all they do is divide. They make the world into an "us" and "them", and whenever we divide that way, we always see the "them" as bad.

There are a couple of problems with what I have said. When we follow Jesus, we will always see people as either children of God or potential children of God.

Here is the problem: there is that old part of us - what we call in theological terms "the old Adam" that always wants to fall into those labels. Those labels give us the illusion of feeling better about ourselves. It is an illusion because that is all that that old Adam gives.

But this leads to another problem. It is a problem with the church. We all have our comfort zones. But not everyone in the church has the same comfort zone.

In the reading from Acts today, we hear about Peter preaching to a gathering of Jews. Later though, when the gospel was reaching out to those who were not physical descendants of Abraham, that was beyond his comfort zone. It was also uncomfortable to many others in that first church.

Yet, there was someone named Paul who was able to meet those people. The Holy Spirit used Paul to expand the comfort zone, so the gospel could reach to so many others.

As children of God, we who follow Jesus are called to make significant contact with anyone who comes along our path - whether or not other Christians are ready to accept them. Whether or not we have other names we might want to call them.

You are now called Children of God – and every one you meet is either a fellow Child of God, or a potential Child of God.