

Named and Claimed

A woman who works for a medical answering service shares this experience: “Early one morning, a man called. He gave me his name, phone number and message and then said, ‘You know *my* name. What's yours?’

‘Four one six three,’ I replied, since we’re allowed to give only our operator numbers.

Sounding disappointed, the caller asked, ‘Would it be too personal if I called you by your first digit?’”

In our world and in our nation, there are a lot more of us than there were fifty years ago. As the population has grown, does it ever feel as though your name is gradually being taken away and replaced by a number? Even back in the day, when I was an undergraduate, the university assigned me a matriculation number, a number I would need in order to register for every course I took in college.

Today, when you have to call a company’s customer service department, and you finish navigating through the voice menu maze and entering a lengthy sequence of digits on your keypad,

and then waiting on hold; when at long last you get to the top of the queue; when finally you get to speak with a human being, that person probably isn't too interested in your name. What he or she—in all likelihood—wants to know about you is your number. Your account number. Your zip code. Your phone number. Your credit card number. Even your Social Security number. Or at least the last four digits. It's all about your number. Your identity has been reduced to a number.

And speaking of your identity. In this twenty-first century world, there's a need to *safeguard* your identity. On the phone. On the internet. Even in person. Whether you're emailing or blogging or shopping online or in a brick-and-mortar store, you key in your user ID and your password. Or your PIN. Not your actual name.

Another thing about names: Occasionally, you'll hear people in various occupations—people who don't really know you too well—address you as “honey” or “sweetie.” I guess that when they use these terms of easy familiarity, it might be because, in their jobs, they meet the public and, in the course of a workday, they encounter so many people that it would seem burdensome to call each one by name.

We live amid a culture of anonymity. A generation or two ago, most people knew their neighbors by name. But with today's fast-paced lifestyles—especially in urban and suburban areas—neighbors often aren't known to one another, except to say “hi” in passing.

Even in some communities of faith, people who worship together every Sunday may not know one another's names. Some churches are so big that it's not possible to know each member by name. For this reason, more and more larger churches are dividing their congregations into small groups—not unlike the classes within John's Wesley's Methodist societies. In small groups, believers bond. Believers share. Believers hold one another accountable. Believers form close relationships. Believers know one another by name.

We want to be known by name, don't we? Being known by name connotes welcome. Hospitality. Friendliness. Fellowship. Personal relationship. It's important to be known by name.

In biblical times, names bore a special significance. They still do. Your name communicates something about you. Your name helps people understand who you are. My given name is *Alice*. Knowing that my name means “truth” means that I have a

charge to keep. In my mother's family, the name *Alice* was passed down from generation to generation. My mother and father named me. Names come from parents. But not *only* from parents.

The One Jesus calls *Father* told Mary and Joseph what to name him, according to the Gospels. This name was in frequent usage at the time of Jesus' birth. But he is the only One who is also known as "Emmanuel," which means *God-with-us*.

As Madeleine L'Engle points out, "Jesus came to be one of us—not separated from us, not different, but one of us, bearing a common name, Jesus...[He] came to us as a human being, with a name. If we are to be human we must know and be known by name...When we are named, we have to be willing to accept that name as something God has given us."

Names come from our parents. Our names are also gifts from God. And our baptisms are gifts from God. Some folk use the word *christen* as a synonym for *baptize*. But "christen" means only "to give a name to" at baptism.

This Sunday, the church reads Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus arises, dripping from the Jordan, and Spirit-anointed, he hears a heavenly voice, the very voice

that in the beginning brings worlds into being. Of those gathered on the riverbank, only Jesus can hear this voice saying: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

But these words come as well to Mark's readers—including you and me. We know who Jesus is. At his baptism, Jesus is identified as God's Son. Jesus is marked by God's love.

And just as Jesus was baptized, so, too, you and I are baptized. We are baptized in a *name*: in the name of the triune God, in obedience to Jesus' command that his followers baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit, the wind from God, that sweeps over the waters at creation.

“Through baptism, you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation...” For baptism is the beginning of new life in Christ.

And as one who has been baptized, you are so much more than the number the world would assign you. You are a beloved child of God. You are a cherished member of God's family. You are a daughter or a son whom God knows personally. Knows intimately. Knows fully. God knows every hair on your head.

And has known you since before God made you in secret, knit you together in your mother's womb.

And in baptism, this same God, in whose name you are baptized, gives you a name. Another name. A new name: *Christian*.

But your own name is written on the palms of God's hands. God will never forget your name. God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, speaks words of assurance: *I have called you by name; you are mine*. God has claimed you.

Our United Methodist Church teaches that "God claims [you] to be participants in the gracious covenant of which baptism is the sign." This covenant is God's steadfast promise to you, a promise of adoption by grace. This covenant is your promise to God to respond in faith and love. In this covenant, you make solemn vows, or these vows are made for you.

Baptism of the Lord Sunday offers you the opportunity to once again renounce sin and profess your faith. To remember your baptism and to be thankful. To reaffirm your baptismal covenant.

You have entered into this covenant with the One to whom you belong. You are God's. You have a share in the ministry of all baptized Christians.

In baptism, God claims you. Being claimed by God is an amazing gift and privilege. Being claimed by God is also an awesome commitment. Being claimed by God means offering yourself for God's saving purposes, offering all that you are. Being claimed by God means offering your life. Being claimed by God means saying: *Here I am, Lord. Send me. Use me as your instrument of mercy and justice and peace. Make me your vessel so that I can pour out your love and your grace. Put me to work and let me be about the service of your kingdom.*

In baptism, God claims you and God names you.

When you're baptized, you are called by name. You are addressed by name, in the presence of the whole community of faith. When the family of God vows to enfold you in love and forgiveness, and nurture you in faith, they know who you are. God's family knows you by name.

For you have been baptized. And my prayer for you this morning is that your ears will be opened and that you will hear the voice of the One who at your baptism spoke these words of

tenderness to you, and still today is speaking these very same words. To you!

I claim you as my choice. You are mine. You are my very own child. I delight in you. You are marked by my love.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.