

“You have called me by name”

January 10, 2010

Text: Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-22

I.

In all of life, names are important. In a world that is so often impersonal, where so often we're identified by a number: a social security number, an account number, a license plate number, a health card number or a phone number ...

We have all these numbers—these abstractions—that identify us. But they don't really identify us; they merely number us. However, we want to be more than a number.

Our name identifies us. It's personal. It says something about who we are. It has meaning and often times a history. Sometimes, we're named *after* a special family member or friend. Our name helps remind us that we are a special human being, totally unique.

When someone *remembers* our names, generally speaking, it's touching, isn't it? It's an expression of caring. There's a certain *warming of the heart*, like, ***Oh, you remembered my name.*** Right away, we feel more welcomed, more valued.

The Bible teaches us, friends, that we are **named, known, valued and loved.**

II.

I don't know about you, but when I make a telephone call, most of the time, I don't want to be left talking to a machine. Does that frustrate you, like it does me? Now there are times when an answering machine works fine ... like calling an airline for flight information ... or making a routine payment with your credit card.

But most of the time, we want to talk to a real, live, human person.

A couple of years back, I remember calling one of our sister UCC churches and, try as I did, I couldn't reach a human person. They received so much bad feedback that they eventually changed it and now when you call, you get a real person. But, can you imagine that? That's like calling some crisis HOTLINE and all you get is a machine.

Would you like to call the church and hear: ***Miami Lakes Congregational Church ... main men:***

For the pastor's voice mail, press #1 ... for Christian Education news, press #2; for your favorite hymn, press #3 ... for the business office and questions about your pledge, press #4; for intercessory prayer, press #5 ... for the *Psalm of the*

week, press #6; for counseling services, press #7 ... for today's inspirational message, press #8.

My guess is: you wouldn't like that. Rightfully, you'd want a human voice on the other end and a human heart sustaining that human voice.

There are times when our zeal for efficiency runs against our caring. Knowing one another's names and talking personally with one another are part of our caring; they're part of our love.

III.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, we read of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and of God's glowing affirmation:

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Baptisms are *naming* events. When we do a baptism here in our church, invariably, we ask: ***And what is the name of the child to be baptized?*** And then I repeat the child's name as I sprinkle the baptismal waters upon them.

It's a sacred event, a naming of the child in the presence of God and the gathered support community.

In the reading from **Second Isaiah**, Israel—after all she's been through in almost fifty years of Babylonian exile—is invited to go home again. After all her losses and estrangement and despair, a word of hope is sounded. God has remembered Israel—remembered her name. Check it out:

But now, thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.

Imagine how these words might affect the Israelites who heard them! ***I have called you by name and you are mine*** ... *you who have been defeated, deported and isolated* ...

1. *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you ... and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you ...*
2. *When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you ...*
3. *For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior ... and you are precious in my sight ...and honored ...and I love you.*

As a human being, there is nothing worse than to remain forever nameless ... seemingly unseen, devalued and diminished. It's a sad day in heaven whenever any human being is alienated and estranged—on the outside looking on, teetering on the edge of feeling abandoned or unwanted.

IV.

In the film of some years ago, *Cider House Rules*, there's a gripping scene at the orphanage, the setting for the first part of the movie: the children are playing out front in the snow ... and suddenly a young couple arrives. Immediately, the children all start grooming themselves to look presentable ... a potential family for one of the orphans is always a big thing.

1. All of the children long for a family ... to have a mom and a dad.
2. In this scene, there's this adorable little boy, **Curly**, who's perhaps 6 or 7.
3. He'd never been chosen. However, this time, he was ready ... had his bag all packed ... just brimming with hope that this would be his day.
4. But it was not to be; the couple wanted a little girl and **Curly** is pictured peering out the window in wistful yearning as the young couple drive away with their little girl.
5. *How come no one ever chooses me*, he asks? *I'm the best one. I just know I am. How come no one wants me?*

We feel the same way about **Curly**, friends, as God feels about each of us. We can't bear to leave him behind ... **to NOT take him with us.**

I have called you and named you, says the Lord, *and you are mine.* And, therefore, it saddens us to see the little **Curlys** of the world so seemingly abandoned and left out.

V.

AS children of God, none of us should ever doubt our worth as a human person. No matter anything about us—our possible failures, rejections, poor choices along the way ... whatever it is. We should NEVER doubt our worth as a human being. There is NO human person who is not a somebody.

I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME ... and you are mine. We belong to God.

1. In other words, we don't belong to popular culture ... to the ethos of modern entertainment and sports.

2. We don't belong to capitalism or any economic system ... or to the consumer culture that engulfs us.
3. We don't belong to some political party or ideology ... or to some protest movement around whatever issue or social cause, no matter its virtue.
4. We belong to God.

In many ways, that's a radical notion. We're not some accident of fate, some casual attachment to the lineage of our family, some second choice, or some backup plan or afterthought.

You see, God has a vision, a dream for your life—for mine, too. God has a vision, a hope, a purpose for every human life. This vision is linked to the dawning of creation. It's affirmed in our Baptism when we bring God's eternal blessing upon us and pray that God's purposes and guiding hand will—everyday—be upon us.

I have called you by name, says the Lord, and you are mine.

VI.

The Quaker philosopher **Rufus Jones**, in his autobiography, relates a childhood incident which, on the surface, might seem innocuous and unimportant. But he says it was probably the turning point in his life ... and no doubt it helped make him the man he grew to be.

One day, as it happened, his parents asked him to weed the garden while they were gone for a few hours. He had just begun when some friends came by and persuaded him to go fishing with them, promising to help him weed the garden when they got back from fishing. But, as anyone who has ever fished knows, it's pretty much impossible to keep track of time when you're fishing—especially if the fish are biting.

When young Rufus finally returned home after dark—and the garden had not been weeded—his mother was waiting for him. Silently, she led him into his room. He knew he deserved whatever was coming, and he offered not a word of excuse. But then, he remembers, a miracle happened.

Mother put me in a chair, kneeled down, put her hands on me, and told God all about me. (Can you imagine this, now?) She interpreted her dream of what my life was to be. She portrayed the boy and the man of her hopes. She told God what she always expected me to be, and then how, in recent weeks, I had disappointed her hope.

O God, she prayed, *take this boy of mine and make him the boy and man he is divinely ordained to be.*

Wow! *And then, as he describes it, she bent over and kissed me and went out from my room leaving me in the silence of God.*

VII.

Everyone of us here this morning is a somebody, named and valued by our Creator God more than words can describe. No matter anything about any of us—up or down—God has a vision, a purpose for our lives ... stuff for us to do.

It's the New Year, a time for new beginnings, and God has called us by name to be about God's labor of love in the world.

And so as the New Year unfolds, and as stuff happens as it always does, let us remember:

Do not fear ... I am with you ... I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, says the Lord, and you are mine.

- 1. When you pass thru the waters of doubt and discouragement, I will be with you ...*
- 2. When you walk thru the fires of challenge and the testing of your commitments, you shall not be burned ...*
- 3. When you lie alone at night, during a moment of utter isolation and poignant worry, I am with you ...*
- 4. When the burdens of life build up, becoming more than we think we can bear, I am with you ...*

For I am the Lord your God; and from the East and the West I have gathered you in; from the North and the South, I have called you home. Because you are precious in my sight ... and I honor you and love you.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlccchurch.com

