

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen

I think that we've all probably heard the phrase, "Terms of Endearment". These are distinctive words or phrases that we usually use to let the people who are close to us know that they are also special to us. The words may sound silly to someone who is outside of the immediate relationship but are used to show our love. I read an article by a new father who noted this phenomenon when he wrote, "I recently ran through the list of nicknames that my wife and I have called our daughter, Bridgette since she was born. I was amazed that, in only 22 weeks, we have referred to her as: Bridgette, Bridge, Bridgey, Bridgelet, Bridgester, Bridgemeister, Bridgeman, Bridgette-the-Fidgettey-Midget, Pooh, Pumpkin, Pumpkin Seed, Peanut, Muffin, Noodle, Doodle, Doodle-Doo, Dew Drop, Sweet Pea, Pea Pod, Boopie, Bubbles, Bundles, and Stinky, the Bald-Headed Girl. That last one was Bridgette's nickname for only the first week after she was born and I fully expect her to take me to court over it one day. In the end, I think that my extensive repertoire of nicknames for our daughter comes from my desire to dote and fawn and fuss over her that much more. However, in the end, a Bridgette by any other name still smells like Johnson's Baby Powder."

We've probably heard the phrase "that a rose by any other name still smells as sweet", but we also know how true it is that WHAT we are called can make a difference. As we go through childhood, if we are called "smart," it may make a difference in our self-image but, by same token, if we are called "stupid," it may also make a difference.

What our FAMILIES are called is also important. My grandfather's name was "Daniel Boone Ince" and my father's name was "Daniel Boone Ince Jr." As Dad grew into adulthood, he hated being called "Junior". After he left home and came to California, the only people who ever

called him that were his siblings. The term grated on him even then and he always dropped it whenever possible. When I came along, I was the first male child but my father insisted that I NOT be named "Daniel Boone Ince the third" so they gave me a different middle name. Family lore says that we're related through marriage to THE Daniel Boone. This possible connection impressed some people over the years and it made for some interesting conversations.

The reading from Isaiah that we heard shows that he also understood the importance of our name: — "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, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." Isn't that a beautiful description of divine love and protection! And why? No other reason than that God has summoned us by NAME and we ARE God's own children!

As a counterpoint to Isaiah, our gospel lesson from Luke carries us to the waters of the Jordan and the story of Jesus' baptism. Over the years, theologians have wrestled with the reason that Jesus saw the need to be baptized, but most say that this was the Lord's visible demonstration that he IS really WITH us. The Lord is with us in our fears, with us in our foolishness, with us in our failures, with us all the way down into the mud of the Jordan.

In Charlton Heston's autobiography, "In the Arena", he described making the movie "The Greatest Story Ever Told" which was shot in November of 1963. Heston played the part of John the Baptizer and the director, George Stevens, had chosen to film the baptism scenes on the Colorado River in Glen Canyon, Arizona. Heston pointed out that in November, the temperature of the water was in the low forties. It made for some interesting reactions as the hundreds of extras were

immersed, one by one, in the cold Colorado. He observed that, "As they came up, gasping and wild-eyed, the cameras conveyed a pure, heartfelt epiphany." It took several days to shoot this scene and Heston remarked that they "baptized" around sixty extras a day. He thought that the real Baptizer probably did a better job.

So, after standing in cold water for several days, dressed in a bearskin, they got to the scene where Heston was to baptize the actor portraying Jesus. While he was waiting in the water for the shooting to begin, he would warm his hands on a cup of hot coffee with his head down. This probably caused the director some concern because he called out, "How are ya doin', Chuck?" Heston says he answered, "I'm okay, George. But I'll tell you this, if the Jordan River had been as cold as the Colorado, Christianity NEVER would have gotten off the ground."

I think that the moving climax of the scriptural scene in the Gospel is wonderful and inspiring. As we just heard, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him in a bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' " This also makes me wonder why God was well pleased with Jesus. At this point, Jesus hadn't begun God's ministry yet. He hadn't preached or taught or healed or done any of those other things that we identify with his ministry. And yet God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's kind of interesting that God praised Jesus before he did the great things that we associate with Jesus. In life, we reverse that order and we don't usually give a person our praise and approval until that person has done something to earn it.

That's the case except when we refer to our own children in terms of endearment because, as a loving parent, we'll usually start with these words of affirmation and affection right from the beginning. "You are my Child, whom I love." The fact that, in his baptism, Jesus heard God's "term of endearment," provides something that's important for

us as well. When we remember and celebrate our own baptism, we recall that we, too, have been called God's children. Baptism can be seen as the beginning of our journey of faith and the first word of God's love and acceptance for us. As I read in the book "Walk in Love", "... Every journey begins somewhere, and every Christian's journey in the church begins with Holy Baptism".

During my working years, I spent quite a lot of time working with a customer in Eastern Tennessee so I read with interest a story that was written by the Rev Fred Craddock. He told the story about when he and his wife were vacationing in the Great Smokey Mountains area of Tennessee. They had found a lovely restaurant that I've also been to in that area and wrote, "We were seated there looking out at the mountains when this old man, with shocking white hair, a Carl Sandburg-looking person, came over and spoke to us. He said, "You're on vacation?" We said, "Yes," and he just kept right on talking. "What do you do," he asked. Craddock was thinking that it was none of his business, but he told the person that he was a minister.

Then he said, "Oh, a minister, well I've got a story for you." He pulled out a chair and sat down. Later, Fred was told that the man was eighty years old and a former governor of Tennessee. The old gentleman said, "I was born back here in these mountains and when I was growing up, I attended Laurel Springs Baptist Church. My mother was not married when I was born and, as you might expect in those days, I was embarrassed and ostracized about that situation. At school, I would hide in the weeds at a nearby river and eat my lunch alone because the other children were very cruel. And when I went to town with my courageous mother, I would see the way people looked at me trying to guess who my daddy was.

"The preacher at the Baptist Church fascinated me but, at the same time, he scared me. He had a long beard, a rough-hewn face and a deep voice, but I sure liked to hear him preach. But, because of my

parentage, I didn't think that I was welcome at church so I would go there just to hear the sermon. And, as soon as it was over, I would rush out so nobody would say, 'What's a boy like you doing here in church.' "One day though," the old man continued, "I was trying to get out after the sermon but some people were already standing in the aisle so I had to remain. I was waiting, getting in a cold sweat, when, all of a sudden, I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and realized that it was the preacher and I was scared to death.

"The preacher was looking at me but didn't say a word. He just looked and then he said, 'Well boy, you're a child of... ' and he paused. I didn't think that he was trying to guess who my mother was but who my father was." "The preacher finally said, 'You're a child of...um. Why, you're a child of God! I can see a striking resemblance, boy!' He swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Go and claim your inheritance!'" And then the old man finished his story by saying to Fred Craddock, "I was born on that day!"

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." What beautiful terms of endearment! In baptism, we find our own affirmation and we should remember that fact as we recall our own baptisms. That is where we find the strength for the struggle, the courage for the crises, and the everlasting hope for the future. We ARE a part of God's family, each of us is God's own child, never alone, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus all the days of our lives.

Thanks be to the God who claims us as Children of God and Amen!