

**WHO WE ARE; LUKE 3:21-22; JANUARY 10, 2013; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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I love that moment just after Jesus is baptized by John and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus, at his baptism is given a name – God's Son, the Beloved. Baptism is our identity-forming moment in our spiritual journey. I tell parents when we baptize their children we are acknowledging that we do not own our children, our children belong to God.

Congregations commit to be the 'village' if you will of surrogate parents and siblings who assist parents in raising their children to know and remember who they are – beloved of God.

A colleague tells a story about how once we are claimed by God and the church in baptism, God does not easily let us go. He tells about a boy in his church who returned home from his first year at college. He appeared at the pastor's office to tell the pastor that he would not be seeing him at church while he was home over the summer. When the pastor asked why, the boy said, "Well, you see I have been doing a lot of thinking about religion while I was at college, and I have come to the conclusion that there is not much to this religion thing. I have found out that I don't need the church to get by," he said.

The pastor responded by saying that he found all of that interesting. "Aren't you worried?" asked the boy. "I thought you would go through the roof when I told you," he said.

The pastor had known the boy for about five years, had baptized him a couple of years ago on profession of faith, and had watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a difficult family situation. The church had been very interested and active helping the boy and had a hand in making it possible for him to go to college.

"No, I'm interested, but not overly concerned," said the pastor. "I'll be watching to see if you can pull it off." "What do you mean, 'pull it off'?" asked the boy. "I don't understand. I'm nineteen. I can decide to do anything I want to do, can't I?"

"When I was nineteen I thought I was 'on my own' too," the pastor replied. "I'm saying that I am not so sure you will be able to get away with this." The boy looked increasingly confused.

"Why not?" he asked. "Well for one thing, you're baptized," the pastor said. "So what does that have to do with anything?" the boy protested.

"Well, you try forsaking it, rejecting it, forgetting about it," the pastor said "and maybe you'll find out."

"I can't figure out what baptism has to do with me," the boy said. "Well for one thing," replied the pastor, "there are people here who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer and they will be nosing around, asking you what you are doing with your life, what kind of grades you made last semester what you're doing with yourself."

"Then there's also God," the pastor continued. "No telling what God might try with you. From what I've seen of God, once he has claimed you, you don't get off the hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what is his. And, in baptism, God says you belong to him."

The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange, unreasonable brand of ecclesiastical reasoning and more or less stumbled out the door of the pastor's study. In a week or two he was back at his usual place on the second pew. The baptizers had done their work. God's possessiveness remained firm. Somewhere C.S. Lewis says that he feels sorry for atheists. He feels sorry for people who try to live their lives without god because, in Lewis' words, "God is so resourceful, so unscrupulous in keeping his own."

Back in high school I remember my mother on more than one occasion saying to me before I went out the door on a Friday or Saturday night, "Remember who you are." That was her blessing as I went into the world of adolescent experimentation. Her words were like a compass that helped me more than once keep myself headed in the right direction.

It's not easy in the modern world, amidst conflicting voices and claims to remember who we are. We are forever answering to some false name, misunderstanding who we are and by whom we are named. So we forget.

It's not easy for young people who are asking beneath their growing, striving and achieving, "Who am I?" The question, the quest occupies much of our teenage years and there are myriad groups, cults, philosophies ready and willing to tell us who we are. An extreme example is ISIS – trolling the internet for young people who are searching for themselves; and so ISIS offers a fraudulent message of identity to young people. "Join us and you will belong, you will be part of something bigger than you, something important."

All of us are subject to the advertisements, movies and songs that tell us we are little more than sexual beings – lusting and being lusted after. Or other voices telling us we are mostly a brain – reasoning, thinking, absorbing facts and figures going to school, endless school, living only to learn not learning to live as someone said.

Other smooth talking voices tell us we are makers and spenders of money; revenue centers who have influence; for whom producers are willing to battle for our allegiance and dollars.

And, of course, there is the modern secular voice that drums into us that we are autonomous, self-made beings. "Nobody will look out for you but you. You are the most important project in your life.

Therefore, focus on your needs, wants, future, desires."

But the church has always said to the question of “Who am I?” “You are baptized God’s beloved.” The church is saying our identity is a gift, a corporate endowment of the community of gathered Christians, something bestowed upon us like grace – not a personal discovery by rooting about in the dark recesses of our egos with fleeting glimpses of ourselves as we drift from one momentary high to another. Rather our identity is given, not earned.

Back a few years, in the month of January Alex Haley’s epic story *Roots* debuted on national television. In fact, it was the week of the famous blizzard of ’77. Maybe you remember Kunta Kinte who drove his master to a ball at a big plantation house. As he was waiting in the carriage for the ball to be over and his owner to return, Kunta Kinte heard other music coming from the slaves’ quarters, the little cabins behind the big house. It was different music, music with a different rhythm. He got out of the carriage and wandered down the path to the cabins and found the one where the music was coming from.

There he found a man playing African music, music he remembered from his childhood, music he had almost forgotten. Kunta Kinte found that the man was from his section of Africa. They talked excitedly, in his native language, of home and the things of home. That night, after returning from the dance Kunta Kinte went home changed. He lay upon the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept. The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But the music helped him remember.

This is a parable of baptism. A parable of how easy it is in the midst of this life, to forget who we are and whose we are.

So we, the church, are here to remind us as my mother reminded me in high school, “Remember who you are”; the church reminds us that someone greater than us has named and claimed us and seeks us and loves us with only one good reason – that he might love us for eternity.

Today, at the start of 2016 is a good day to remember our baptisms and be thankful for who we are. Amen.

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This sermon is largely indebted to William Willimon’s sermon, “The Gifted,” from *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 44, No. 1, Year C, January through March, 2016.