

Baptism of the Lord - Matthew 3:13-17

A few years ago, the African American poet, Maya Angelou, was offered a guest teaching role at Wake Forest University. In the first day of her class, she spent the entire class period learning the student's names by spelling them out and having the students explain their origins.

In the second class period, she reviewed the names again and in the third class period, she repeated the process. After the third time around, she asked the class, "Why do you think that I have devoted twenty per cent of valuable class time simply to learn your names?"

There was a deafening silence. So Ms. Angelou answered her own question. "Your name is a sign of your dignity. Calling someone by name is recognizing someone, not simply as human, but as a person. You bestow dignity on another person when you call them by name."

Our value, if it is to become real, must be claimed. If our dignity is to have power, we must hear our true name. This is what is happening to Jesus in today's gospel.

In biblical terms, the Baptism of the Lord marks the moment in Jesus' life when he recognizes his own dignity. It is the moment in his life when he hears his true name.

The baptism of Jesus marks a specific change, a watershed, in Jesus' life. At that moment Jesus realizes that he is more than the son of Mary, more than a faithful Jew, more than a son of the carpenter. He is God's beloved Son.

This is the name that is given to him from the heavens. Now, of course, Jesus was always God's beloved Son. But in his humanity, there was a moment in which he claimed his dignity.

This is what we celebrate today on this feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

For those parents who have had their children recently baptized you will recall that the first thing the Church asks is, “What **name** do you give your child?”

Just as Jesus needed to claim his own dignity, we need to do the same. We are valuable. By faith and Baptism, we have become daughters and sons of God in Christ. That is who we are, but unless we claim that dignity, it will never have power.

Unless we own our true identity, we will never be able to understand who we truly are. If we go through life just doing one thing after the other, it is easy to let the circumstances of life define who we are.

We can allow our failures and mistakes to tell us that we are worthless. But this is not the truth. God has made us and saved us. God has made us His own. We will only know that identity when we claim our true name.

And the minute we do that, it leads us to mission. The minute we are able to say to ourselves, “I am a beloved daughter or son,” in that minute, we have good news.

We have good news to spread to the world. Jesus’ baptism does not only mark the moment where he claims his true identity and dignity, it is also the beginning of his public ministry. For in Jesus’ life, as in ours, when we claim our identity, we become empowered for mission. Dignity leads to service.

So that is who we are. We are God’s beloved children. But we need to claim that identity in order to know our dignity, in order to serve.

We need to claim that identity regularly. Here's what I need to do. I need to wake up each morning and say, "My name is John and I am a beloved son of God. I am not worthless. I am precious. I am not without purpose. I am called.

I am not forgotten. I am loved. God delights in the fact that I have another day to live."

That's what I need to do each day, and you need to do the same. You need to wake up each morning and say this is my name and I am a child of God.

Once we do that, once we claim that identity, a question follows: Lord, what do you want me to do today? That's the way to begin each morning, claiming your identity and asking God how you are called to serve.

I assure you, if we could begin our day in that way, we would live a radically different life.

Another college professor gave a pop quiz. The students breezed through the questions until they read the last one:

'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?'

Surely they thought this was some kind of joke. They had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50's, but how would they know her name?

They handed in their papers, leaving the last question blank. Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward their grade.

‘Absolutely,’ said the professor. ‘In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say ‘hello.’

They never forgot that lesson. They also learned her name was Dorothy.

Claiming who we are and hearing our true name gives us a mission to share the Good News.

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

AMEN.