

God Calls us By Name

Isaiah 43:1-7

January 10, 2010

Who remembers playing “Red Rover, Red Rover?” Come on, a show of hands? How many of you really loved playing it – show of hands? And I thought I liked some of you. “Red Rover” wasn’t one of my favorite childhood games. You know how it was one of those games where two people were elected or elected themselves to be the captains and then proceeded to alternately choose the members of their team? Well, I usually didn’t have to start listening until they got pretty far into the list of Diane, Becky, Marilyn – you get the picture? I was skinny in those days – and weaker than I was skinny.

Now, when it came time for the sides to choose someone to come over – oh, yeah, I was often the first one picked by the opposing side – because they knew I wouldn’t be able to break through the weakest link in their human chain. And then, they’d put me in between two of the strongest guys on the team who wouldn’t let go of my arm if Thaddeus Gibson or Cameron Heyward were the ones invited over! “Red Rover, Red Rover” was not one of my favorite games.

In his book Letters to My Children Dan Taylor wrote a letter to his son, Matthew. He wrote: “Dear Matthew, when I was in the sixth grade I was an All-American. I was smart, athletic, witty, handsome, and incredibly nice. Things went downhill fast in junior high, but for this one year at least, I had everything.

“Unfortunately, I also had Miss Owens for an assistant teacher. She helped Mr. Jenkins, our regular teacher. She knew that even though I was smart and incredibly nice, there was still a thing or two I could work on.

“One of the things you were expected to do in grade school was learn to dance. My parents may have had some reservations at first, but since this was square dancing, it was okay.

“Every time we went to work on dancing, we did this terrible thing. The boys would all line up at the door to the classroom. Then, one at a time, each boy would pick a girl to be his partner. The girls all sat at their desks and joined the snot-nosed kids who had honored them with their favor.

“Believe me, the boys did not like doing this – at least I didn’t. But think about being one of those girls. Think about waiting to get picked. Think about seeing who was going to get picked before you. Think about worrying that you’d get picked by someone you couldn’t stand. Think about worrying whether you were going to get picked at all!

“Think if you were Mary. Mary sat near the front of the classroom on the right side. She wasn’t pretty. She wasn’t real smart. She wasn’t witty. She was nice, but that wasn’t enough in those days. And Mary certainly wasn’t athletic. In fact, she’d had polio or something when she was younger; one of her arms was drawn up, and she had a bad leg, and to finish it off, she was kind of fat.

“Here’s where Miss Owens comes in. Miss Owens took me aside one day and said, ‘Dan, next time we have square dancing, I want you to choose Mary.’

“She may as well have told me to fly to Mars. It was an idea that was so new and inconceivable that I could barely hold it in my head. You mean pick someone other than the best, the most pretty, the most popular, when my turn came? That seemed like breaking a law of nature or something.

“And then Miss Owens did a really rotten thing. She told me it was what a Christian would do. I knew immediately I was doomed because I knew she was right. It was exactly the kind of thing Jesus would have done. I was surprised, in fact, that I hadn’t seen it on a Sunday School flannel board yet. ‘Jesus choosing the lame girl for the Yeshiva dance.’ It was bound to be somewhere in the bible.

"I agonized. Choosing Mary would go against all the coolness I had accumulated.

"The day came when we were to square dance again. If God really loved me, I thought, he will make me last. Then picking Mary will cause no stir. I will have done the right thing, and it won't have cost me anything.

"You can guess where I was instead. For whatever reason, Mr. Jenkins made me first in line. There I was, my heart pounding – now I knew how some of the girls must have felt.

"The faces of the girls were turned toward me, some smiling. I looked at Mary and saw that she was half-turned to the back of the room, her face staring down at her desk. Mr. Jenkins said, 'Okay, Dan – choose your partner.'

"I remember feeling very far away. I heard my voice say, 'I choose Mary.'

"Never has reluctant virtue been so rewarded. I still see her face undimmed in my memory. She lifted her head, and on her face, reddened with pleasure and surprise and embarrassment all at the same time, was the most genuine look of delight and even pride that I have ever seen, before or since. It was so pure that I had to look away because I knew I didn't deserve it.

"Mary came and took my arm, as we had been instructed, and she walked beside me, bad leg and all, just like a princess.

"I never saw Mary after that year. I don't know what her life's been like or what she's doing. But I'd like to think she has a fond memory of at least one day in the sixth grade. I know I do.

Dad."¹

Being chosen – having your name called out – being noticed – being named when you don't feel you're worth anything – when you feel left out – when you're not feeling too good about yourself – when you're not sure who you are – whether you matter – when you're ashamed – when you're used to hearing "cripple," "runt," "drunk," "slow," "uncoordinated," "fatso," – when you're having self-doubts and you're paid attention to – told that you are worthwhile – well, your whole world can change. One can be healed of a lot when you believe you're worth something.

In the portion of the text Jeff read for us a few moments ago the prophet Isaiah was addressing his Jewish brothers and sisters who were living in exile in Babylonia as a result of King Nebuchadnezzar conquering Judah in the sixth century B.C. The Jerusalem temple had been destroyed – families had been split apart – the nation was in chaos. The exiles felt like losers. They seemingly were without hope and Isaiah called them to their senses. He reminded them of whose they were. He offered them words of hope.

He spoke as if God was the one doing the speaking: "I created you; I formed you." Consider paraphrasing Isaiah's words in this way: "I birthed you; I am your mother." Isaiah was reminding them of the relationship they had with God. He evoked from their hearts and helped them recall in their minds the thought that believing God could forget them was as absurd as believing that mothers could forget their children or that inventors could abandon their inventions.

"I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine." The prophet Isaiah, again sharing words he believed God wanted the people to hear, referenced God's possessiveness and protective nature. "No matter what you believe about the situation you find yourself in, believe that God is not the source of your troubles but the source of hope, the one through whom our lot has meaning and the one by whom we will be saved."²

We are creations of God and "God doesn't make any junk." We are valuable to God simply because we have been created by God. It doesn't matter what we've done, what others believe about us, what we believe

about ourselves – despite our sins, despite our hatred, despite our anger, despite our judgementalness, despite our pride, God claims us. God knows our names – chooses us by name – announces for all to hear that we are worthwhile, that we are important, that he desires to heal us of that which cripples us, which keeps us from being all that we can be. God recognizes us and calls us to be whole and when we believe that, our lives will be different – we will have a different outlook on life and about ourselves and it will make all the difference in the world.

We are sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. Our name is Christian – that’s what we are told in our baptism – that’s why we are baptized – to be reminded whose we are – who it is working in our lives. Christ notices us and calls to us to come to him so that he can say, “You are free from the spirit that cripples you. You are free from your insecurities – you are free from the labels of this world – you are worthy in my eyes – you are my brothers and sisters – you are whole. Believe it, stand up straight, and go in peace and show others how Christ has freed you from the guilt and misconceptions about yourself that cripples you.

In baptism God initiates the beginning of a relationship with us – brings us into God’s family. God says to us today, “I have called you by name. You are mine. Child of God, through your baptism, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” Jesus says to us all today: “Come and claim your inheritance – come and be made whole – go and serve – go and live as Christ’s body in the world, for there are many men and women, many children and youth, crippled by the self-images they now have, who need to be noticed – who need to be talked to – who need to be touched – in the name of Jesus Christ – and to be named Christ’s.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, help each of us to grow into the significance of our baptism. May each of us sense again your call, your summons to discipleship, your claim upon our lives. And, hearing your call, give us the courage and the grace to come forth, to follow, to be your faithful disciples in all that we do and say. Amen.

1. Dan Taylor, Letters to My Children (Bog Walk Books, 2005).
2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Feasting on the Word (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 221.