**Becoming**

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Text: 1 John 3:1-7

As a teacher, I was required not only to have my nametag on at all times, but to require the children to have their nametags, which identified them and me as their teacher, on at all times. This was for safety purposes. It turns out that when a small child is separated from their class, they can become flustered and confused and the name of their teacher and location of their classroom slips from their mind, causing delay in getting them back to the person and place most capable of helping them. Even older children, in distress, struggle to make this information known clearly. So everyone had nametags all the time.

Now, every year, before the kids came, the teachers would have their pictures taken and be given a new nametag. In my haste, I tended to just slip this new tag onto my lanyard on top of the others, where they collected until I replaced the lanyard. So by the time this story takes place, I had five or six all in a stack hanging there. On this particular year, I had a prekindergartener who was struggling to behave appropriately in our Pre-K classroom. My other students were learning some very colorful vocabulary from him and it wasn’t uncommon for us to have to clear the classroom when he became angry and began to destroy the room. On one occasion, as I was kneeling beside him trying to stave off a meltdown, he caught sight of my name tag.

He pointed, “she loves me,” he said, touching my picture.

“Yes.” I said, pointing at his nametag, “he is loved.”

He flipped to the previous year’s nametag and, touching the picture, said, “she loves me.”

“Yes.” I said, “he is loved.”

He continued, flipping one by one through those nametags and chanting, “she loves me.” By the time, he got to the end, his body had relaxed and he was willing to listen…a little bit.

The thing is that that child had been told he was a lot of things. Even at only four years old, he’d been named a troublemaker, a failure, a problem, an embarrassment, a drain, and several others that I can’t repeat. He carried these names with him and they painted for him a picture of who he was.

I hope…I hope…you haven’t ever been bent under such a burden. I hope that when you hear your name, you don’t flinch, hearing a rush of negativity associated with it. But the world is loud and not always kind.

Regretful, defeated, shameful, lazy, sinful, unworthy, cowardly…the things we are told by the world around us write an internal recording that we hear in our heads and our hearts. The words of teachers, parents, bosses, playground bullies, neighbors, they come back, playing on repeat. And without meaning to, we pick up these names and carry them with us.

I wonder what names the world has set on you? If I gave you one of those little sticky badges that proclaim, “Hi, I’m…” what would the voices of the past have you write? What narrative do they create for you?

In his song, Hello, My Name is…Matthew West, a contemporary Christian songwriter, imagines, singing…

“Hello, my name is regret

I'm pretty sure we have met

Every single day of your life

I'm the whisper inside

That won't let you forget

Hello, my name is defeat

I know you recognize me

Just when you think you can win

I'll drag you right back down again

Till you've lost all belief”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Eventually, this thinking affects the way we behave. We can become afraid to connect for fear of being judged. We can become afraid of trying new things for fear of making a mistake. We can become hopeless that nothing can ever change.

But, friends, don’t forget who you really are!

 “Hello, my name is child of the One true King…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

West’s song continues, reflecting the words of this morning’s scripture, and bringing to light the very good news.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; for that is what we are.”

Child of God. Stick that on your nametag and see how it feels.

What kind of love is it that God lavishes on us that we should be called children of God! We don’t deserve it. We haven’t earned it. But we are…simply because God wants it to be so. God holds the power here. Not us. And we can’t say no to God’s claim.

And not only are we children of God, but we are children of God now. Not as we will be…one day far into the future, when we finally get it right, but right now. You, right there in the pew today, you are a child of God.

You, whose big project didn’t get finished by the deadline. You, who disappointed a family member. You, who didn’t get into the school of your choice. You, who hold back who you are for fear you will not be accepted. You, who are having the hardest time seeing your worth right now. You, who are having to come to terms with the fact that you can’t do what you’ve always done anymore. You, you are a child of God right now.

And you are a work in progress. You were a child of God when you were born. And you will be a child of God every day up to and beyond the day of your death. We don’t know what the future has in store for us, but we do know it will change. Our bodies will change and, along with it, the things we can do. Our world will change and, along with it, the way we will work in it. What we will be is yet to be revealed. And what we have been is not the final word either.

Because growing and changing is part of the process of being a child. This is a transformation of which we are still in the midst. It’s that we are children of God every day, claimed by God, called to do the best we can to live into that truth each day in an imperfect world, growing into what God alone knows us to be.

And we’re gonna make mistakes. We can’t do this perfectly. But what we can do and what we are called to do is to turn ourselves toward the way of God and try our best to do the right things, erring always on the side of love. We do our best to live pure lives because we have hope in Jesus, who is the perfection of that. And at the end of our journey, when everything has been revealed, John says, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. God makes this possible.

Until then, when we are confronted with the mess of daily life, we remember that we are still children of God. And that, in each season, we, who hope in a God who brings new things from the hard things, who brings life from death, who brings beginnings from our endings, we keep living and loving like Jesus did, all along the way showing glimpses of the kingdom in the midst of this world that Jesus has already made possible. We can’t see it yet, but it’s a reality that we can live into.

Living and loving like Jesus means relentlessly standing up for those who have been marginalized. We have to listen to the story of the lived experience, notice when someone’s been left out of the conversation, recognize and question our own discomfort, and seek to understand from their perspective. It means seeing where our humanity intersects instead of focusing on what divides us. The kingdom is revealed where love connects us.

Living and loving like Jesus means seeking out and inviting in those who have been cast aside by creating safe spaces for them. We have to change to be more welcoming instead of expecting them to change to fit us. It’s not just saying “you’re welcome here,” but instead “how do we change our space to invite and include because we are incomplete without you?” The kingdom is revealed where all are included in the story of God.

Living and loving like Jesus means being brave enough to speak up and say what needs to be said even when it makes us uncomfortable. Because when we love out loud like that, those who are hurting hear that they are loved.

Living and loving like Jesus means knowing that you are God’s child right now…you, a living, growing flesh and bone human in this imperfect, constantly changing world. You might be constrained by location or age or ability. You might find that your purpose is different, unrevealed until its season, as time passes. But you have a purpose and something to do right here and now to reveal God’s love for this world. And we, because *we* are *only* human, can do this because God loves us enough to claim us and make us children of God.

For the little boy in my class, reading my nametag became his routine. When he became agitated, he’d sidle up beside me and grab my lanyard, or take it and hang it around his own neck, to work his way through the book of people, or…the person, who loved him. The change was painfully slow. But every day that I took the time to love that kid, to best of my ability, the way that God loves me, he started to put on a new name of Beloved. And slowly, he started to see others as people to be loved. I never got to see what was revealed for him because he, like students do, moved on. But I have faith and I think I did my best for him.

I wonder what would happen if we could, as the church in this world, seek to be the pictures of Christ, that affirm, God loves me, for our neighbors. That, as the people in the world see us acting faithfully wherever we are, they could flip through those images of Christ’s love in action, and know, “God loves me.” That, through our actions, we proclaim, you are loved. You are a child of God.”

For that is what we are. Amen.

1. “Matthew West Hello My Name Is…”, [https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/29896155/Matthew+West/Hello%2C+My+Name+Is](https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/29896155/Matthew%2BWest/Hello%2C%2BMy%2BName%2BIs), accessed April 12, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)