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Mark 1:21-28, Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Isaiah 43:1-7 St. Andrew Lutheran

The scripture passages today remind us that words have power. In the passage from Deuteronomy, the prophet's words are a matter of life and death. And in Mark, the power of Jesus' teaching and words are recognized by the unclean spirit. I've been thinking about the power of words, what we hear, what we speak, and who we are.

Today, we welcomed new members to St. Andrew, and we affirmed our baptisms, recognizing we our identity in God. And, just to be clear, when I say "we" I include everyone who has gathered today. Perhaps you are a first time guest, maybe you are checking us out online, or maybe you aren't baptized or confirmed, or perhaps you are a seeker, not certain that church is even for you. . . If any of that fits, know that the "we" I am addressing is in the sense that we are ALL God's children, and at various places in a spiritual journey. . .

Have you ever considered the power of naming? How does it shape our identity and future? There are some funny (true) names that have left me wondering. When I was in high school, there was my dermatologist: Dr. Rashleigh. I wondered, did he go into dermatology because of his name? And there was the minister whose doctor's full name was Dr. Christian Killer. Yes, really! Those names are amusing. But we recognize that names have power and meaning. The one who names us can possibly shape our life and our sense of belonging. And today, the St. Andrew community, is affirming our identity in God, and welcoming in new members.

In Isaiah 43, we read: But now 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. ²When 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. . . . ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; . . . ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Belonging. It is one of our deepest human motivations, and it is at the core of our faith. . In the service of baptism, we call the name of the one baptized, and we recognize that we belong to God, and we belong to one another. This belonging may be challenged right now, when once again, we are physically separated from one another.

The word of God through the voice of the prophet, says:

Do not fear, for I have called you by name. You are mine. I will be with you when you pass through the floodwaters. I will be with you when you walk through fire. No matter what befalls, you won't be overwhelmed by fire, flood, weather, virus, or insurrection. You are precious in my sight, and I love you.

This is a message of comfort and inspiration. In the Mark passage, we read that Jesus taught with authority, not as the scribes. We are not given the details of that particular teaching, or of what the scribes taught. But we can surmise from other passages, that Jesus teaching was calling people back to their identity and purpose, back to true human community. . .and not focusing on the narrow religious judgments of defining who is "in" God's approval and who is "out."

But, just remember, the prophet says: God loves you and calls you by name.

It's possible that the first hearers of this passage may have believed that they only were the chosen ones of God. But today, through the movement of God's Spirit, that message extends to all the forlorn. This tenderness of God sends a universal message: You are precious in my sight, honored, and I love you. How do we realize this meaningfully in our daily lives? How do we live it? On this Sunday, as we remember baptism and belonging, we are reminded that for those who bear the name "Christian," our meaning comes with the vision of unshakeable, forgiving love. One of the best examples we saw in the late Congressman John Lewis.

In his later years, Lewis recalled an encounter with the son of a man who had attacked him at a bus station on May 9, 1961, in Atlanta. This young man had been encouraging his father to seek out the people that he had wronged during the height of the civil rights movement, and it led them to Lewis' office. Lewis remembered, "The father was a few years older than I am. In 1961, I was 21 years old and he was probably 24, maybe a little older. But they beat me and my seatmate and left us lying in a pool of blood at the Greyhound bus station." Lewis recalled that the father, accompanied by his son, came to his office after so many years and asked, "Mr. Lewis, will you forgive me? Do you accept my apology?" Lewis said, "Yes, I forgive you, I accept your apology." At this point, he said, "the man's son started crying, he started crying, and they hugged me, and I hugged them both back and I started crying too; they started calling me brother and I called them brother." The man and his son visited Lewis numerous times after that first encounter.

The disease that has long been preying upon our world and nation, long before pandemic, is the corruption of power, greed, ethnic-cleansing, racism, and white supremacy. But, like the saints before us, we can walk through the fire of resentment and hatred; we can walk through the flood of injustice, apathy, and cruelty. We can choose this path every day, remembering who we are and WHOSE we are. We belong to God, and are called to love. We can choose that, with God's help.

Have you noticed that the more we are able to believe that we ourselves are precious in God's sight, the more we are able to see that others are precious, too? This is how we help love guide and heal our world. And friends, we get there by prayer and action. We don't bury our heads in the sand at the problems, but we keep perspective by being in relationship with others with different experiences. We cultivate a daily discipline of love and trust in God. We choose in our attitude, our words, how we invest ourselves. We steer away from relationships, habits, and situations which foster division, mistrust, un-truth, and destruction. John Lewis said, "Non-violence and forgiveness is not just an idea, but it is a way of living for me."

Especially when we bear the name "Christian," we have the opportunity to remember to live with the same love that Jesus shared, even as he was dying on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Yes. That is a tall order, but friends, it is God who created us, and who lives in us, that gives us the power to choose love.

We may never have so dramatic a story as John Lewis, but we absolutely have the same call to forgiveness and love. Never doubt that our prayer together can bring about love that the world so desperately needs. If we develop the discipline of spending time every day listening to the voice of love, we will gradually develop persistent, strong, and deep blessing in our lives. That blessing will extend to others.

God's Spirit multiplies all that we offer and is part of healing the world, even in fire and flood.

“I have loved you from the beginning. I will love you as others come and go. You are indeed My Beloved, so rest, be still and know.” –Irish Folk melody, public domain; lyrics by Laurie Newman