

“SCHOOL DAYS! SCHOOL DAYS!
I – NAME TAGS”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
September 9, 2018

I Samuel 1:1-7

Luke 19:1-10

If you, like me, are on social media at all, then your screen was positively filled this week with “first day of school” photos. There were tons of them, from little ones starting in kindergarten, to seniors starting the first day of their last year, to college kids standing in their new dorm rooms. They were all wonderful. Most of the kids, of course, were decked out in new everything – clothes, shoes, backpacks and lunch boxes. And in all of the pictures, most of the parents (who I assume took the pictures) were able to coax a smile out of the kids.

That is, in all except one picture I got this week. In that one picture was a weepy little girl, clearly not looking forward to going off to kindergarten. In the caption, her mom wrote how her heart broke when she dropped her daughter off at kindergarten, because the little girl was just sobbing.

Fast forward to her next picture, however, and it was a picture of her daughter at the end of the day, just beaming! She had had a wonderful time and couldn’t wait to go back the next day!

As I looked over all of those pictures, most of them with the kids standing next to or holding signs indicating it was the first day of first grade or senior year or whatever, it occurred to me that we didn’t do those kinds of things growing up – at least not in our family. Of course, back in the dark ages, pictures were taken with cameras and you had to have the film developed into prints, and consider that, in a family with six kids going off on a first day every year – well, it just never happened.

Had we done that, however, I can guarantee you that the ones showing a weepy child would have been the ones with me in them! I don’t remember anything specific, but I do remember the anxiety I felt moving into a new school – like when we moved from Elkwood Estates to Thomson Estates, and we changed from Holly Hall Elementary to Gilpin Manor. And I remember, as I’m sure most of you do as well, the anxiety of going from elementary to middle school, knowing you had to change classes, and sure you were going to get lost.

And don’t even get me started on the anxiety I had going off to college. I’ve told you before I had the worst case of homesickness ever.

Ah, school days! Actually, you may have noticed that that is the title of the new sermon series we're starting today. For a few weeks, we're going to use some things about schools, or things we use at school, as metaphors for life in general, and spiritual life more specifically. So today, we start with "name tags."

I decided to use that image as a jumping off point in this series because it deals with the issue of identity, and knowing who we are. The good news is that each one of us is a beloved child of God. The bad news is that it doesn't take very long in life for us to start to form other images of ourselves – mostly due to what others think of us, or what society tries to dictate to us on what is worthy or what is not.

Very early on, like those precious children going off to school, we learn that others judge us, talk about us, separate themselves off from us in groups. Later on, we begin to understand that the world, society, puts pressure on us to live up to its idea of success – by the clothes we wear, the salary we earn, the homes in which we live, the degrees posted on our walls. We look at advertisers and we're told daily how to fix our sagging skin, how we need to be afraid that we won't have enough money for our families to bury us after we die, how driving the perfect car will make our life perfect as well, and so on.

In the face of all that, it's easy for us to lose our bearings, to forget who we are and whose we are, to begin to base our identity on what others think of us. The two scripture lessons this morning are examples of just that. Let's go back and look at them for a moment.

First, Hannah – dear, sweet Hannah. Let me remind you that Hannah was the wife of a man named Elkannah – who dearly loved her. They had a wonderful marriage, but their greatest heartache was that they had never been able to have children. He had a child with his wife Peninnah, but the true love of his life was Hannah, and it broke both of their hearts that they weren't able to have a child together.

That was heartbreak enough, mind you, but what made it horrifying was how Peninnah treated Hannah. You heard it in the scripture – it said that Penninah - "her rival" the scripture called her – "used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb." It wasn't enough that everyday Hannah mourned her inability to have a child, now this other woman was judging her publicly, it sounds like, on a regular basis. Society in that day and age thought that the inability for a woman to have a baby meant that God was punishing her for some reason; put on top of that Peninnah's verbal abuse of her – well, it's not hard to see Hannah's self-confidence, her self-image eroding. The world was telling her she wasn't worth anything.

In the Gospel lesson, the one the world was judging was a man named Zaccheus. You probably remember his story. He was a tax collector, and tax collectors in that day and age were not admired, largely because many of them lined their own pockets in the process. No matter that part of Zaccheus' problem was an image problem due to his own behavior, the fact is that he felt like he was on the outside looking in. We see that in this morning's lesson. He has heard that Jesus, the Messiah, is coming through town, and something was stirring in his heart - he wanted to see him. But where does he go to do that? Up a tree. Why? Well, there are many theories about it, but one I think holds merit. It was a good hiding place where no one could judge him, call him names, make him feel worse about himself than he already did.

That's what judging and criticism does, you know – causes a lot of people to just want to shrink away and not be noticed. It also makes them question who they are.

We could keep searching the scriptures and find throughout the entire Bible people struggling to know who they are, in the midst of others judging them. Think back on King David. So many people throughout his life judging him, questioning everything he did, questioning his character, telling him what he should or shouldn't do. Some days he felt worthy of the title "King," other days he felt like crawling away and hiding, so severe were his critics and naysayers.

And you see, that's the crux of the matter. When we rely on others to tell us who we are, we get into trouble. When we rely on others to measure what makes a person worthy or not, we're on shaky ground. When it matters so much what others think of us, we forget who we really are and who we're called to be. But you see, that's the way Satan works. Satan goes at us at our points of greatest weakness. We all want to be liked and appreciated, and Satan tries to take our confidence away, make us question ourselves.

Why, look at what Satan did with Jesus in the wilderness of temptation. That was all about making Jesus question himself and his Father. Think about it – when Satan invited Jesus to turn the stone into bread he was, in essence, saying "prove your worth by your performance." And when he took Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and showed him vast lands and told him it all could be his, he was tempting Jesus to know his worth by his possessions. And finally when he tempted Jesus with the lure of having it all and having everybody and everything worship him, he was trying to get Jesus to find his identity in popularity.

That's what Satan does. He will throw everything at us to try to get us to question ourselves – who we are and whose we are. It will come in some of the forms I talked about earlier – criticism from others, judgment from society, gossip, exclusion.

So how do we fight him? How do we fight falling prey to believing about ourselves only what others think of us? Well, again, the Biblical characters I've lifted up today give us some very good direction.

Because all of them, to a person, looked to God. They looked to God for help. Hannah went to God daily in prayer, looking for approval and guidance only from him. Zaccheus literally went to God, went to find God in Jesus who would be passing by that tree. (And remember what happened? Jesus stopped right under that tree, invited Zacchaeus down, and went to his home with him for dinner, a dinner and conversation that changed his life forever, helping him realize he was a precious child of God, worthy of dignity and respect, no matter what his past had been like.) That happened because Zacchaeus looked to God for help.

King David, too, went to God. In a beautiful psalm, Psalm 139, David remembered that it was God who gave him life and breath, it was God who made him who he was, who watched over him day and night, who guided him through everything life and people brought his way. As he wrote, David began to see himself again as God saw him, and it turned everything around for him.

Writer Beth Moore says this: "Living in a culture that's constantly telling you you're not enough – attractive enough, smart enough, rich enough, or failing to measure up in some other way – you must be intentional about viewing yourself the way God sees you rather than giving in to the world's pressures. The truth is that God loves you completely just the way you are, and the security he offers you cannot be shaken." (On-line, Whitney Hople, "Beth Moore Helps Women Say Goodbye to Insecurity")

Friends, your nametag reads, "Precious Child of God, Beloved Child of God." That's who you are. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Don't let advertisers tell you that you don't measure up unless you buy this and so. Don't let co-workers undermine your confidence, or classmates make you feel bad about yourself. Don't let gossipers steal your joy. You are a precious, beloved child of God, worthy of dignity and respect, worthy just as you are.

Knowing that, then, hold your head up high – yes - but do something else as well. Help others realize their belovedness as well. You heard what Bethany said to the children this morning. It's so easy to hurt other people. It's so easy to take cheap shots at them, to put them down, to ignore them or isolate them. But it's just as easy to be kind to them, and to realize, that just like everybody else in this world, they are insecure, they want to be liked, want to know they matter.

Let me finish with an image for us to think about as we leave this place this morning – an image that I saw on Facebook this week. It was a video about a marathon. Hundreds of people were running in this marathon, but this scene took

place within perhaps a hundred yards from the finish line. In the center of the screen was a woman really struggling. Clearly, her legs were cramping up and she was crumbling to the ground. Well, all of a sudden, two other runners, two men, came running up from behind her. It appears they were strangers to her, but one got on one side of her, and the other on the other side, and they put her arms over their shoulders and helped her run the last yards of the race.

Still, she got weaker. Her feet were dragging. So weary was she, that she started to crumble again, even with their help. And then, a man who had turned around and seen what was happening, stopped running, came back to them, and literally picked her up and carried her in his arms to just a few feet from the finish line, where he set her down, and the three of them helped her gingerly walk across the line, where she then got medical aid.

You know what? All three of those men messed up their running times by doing that, and if you know anything about runners, running times mean a lot. But they saw a woman struggling, and forgetting themselves, helped her make her way to the finish.

Isn't that our job as Christians, friends? To help others to the finish line. To help them stand tall and run the race set before them? To help them know they are beloved and precious, not just in the sight of God, but to us as well?

In a world that tempts us to feel otherwise, you and I need to lean on God to remember our identity, and for our daily walk through life. If we do that, we'll be okay. We won't have to look to others for approval; we'll know we are approved by the One that matters – God our Father. And knowing that, we will be able to pass that on to others. May it be so.

Amen.