

The Rev Dr Rebecca L. Kiser
God Doesn't Confuse Me with Anyone Else
Jan 9, 2022 Baptism of the Lord
Luke 3: 15-18, 21-22 and Isaiah 55

A cousin of mine of the Kiser side married a woman named Rebecca a while back - so she became another Rebecca Kiser. They lived in Denver, so we didn't get mistaken for each other too often. This other Rebecca, or Becky (like me), does great work overseas, working with women in the sex trade, ministering to them and helping them change their lives. There was one time I called at another cousin's house and said I was cousin Becky Kiser and it threw the young person who answered for a loop, because I had a different voice from the Becky she knew. And there was another time I got a really nice contribution to my mutual fund, and my advisor called to ask what I wanted to do with it - I said, "What contribution? From where?" About a week later, the other Rebecca Kiser evidently asked what happened to her money, and they moved it out from me...easy come, easy go.....

So I was struck by the words in the baptism service taken from the prophecies of Isaiah 43 (in the way we have divided the Hebrew scrolls into sections). "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine." In our baptism, we are reminded that God calls us by name - God knows my name and doesn't confuse me with any other Rebecca Kisers. And God knows your name (gesture), and your name, and your name....God doesn't confuse you with anyone else. We are known personally and deeply by our God; we are precious to God, we are beloved. God knows our strengths - even those that we might not be aware of yet; and God knows our foibles and weaknesses and quirks - even those we refuse to admit to. God knows our soul, our desires, our intentions, and the things we keep hidden. God knows what we need to be fully healed, and what we are capable of doing and being. And God loves us. Yes, God wants us to grow in our faith and in our living, in our wholeness and in our faithful following. But that's not saying God loves us any less right now.

The other words in the baptism services that grab me are that we become part of the whole body of Christ. Even when we are new disciples, we are already included. That means I am joined to the family of Christ-followers in this congregation...and in the

other congregations nearby...and the other congregations further and further away.....and those in other congregations who speak different languages, who have different skin colors, may worship more loudly or more softly, who may be the kind who march and demonstrate for justice causes, those who may be living in poverty or with complex illness or mental health difficulties. I am joined to those who are 99, or 5; or who lived way before me and are already with God; and those who come after me as believers will be joined with me, too. We are a large body, a large family. The people of God....Christ's body The capital-C Church. No physical boundaries, no national boundaries, jut the great world-wide body of Christ. We are joined in Christ through faith.

This reality is one reason I enjoy going to national conferences, where folks I don't usually interact with have planned the worship or lead workshops, or just sit at my lunch table - and my experience of God is stretched. Twice I've been elected as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterians - where I saw delegates from many countries, many colors, many languages, many ages. That was so cool, to see in the flesh some of the many parts of the great body of Christ that we are all baptized into!

And yet, in this great body, God also knows each of us distinctly and separately, and loves us distinctly and separately. God knows what makes me get intrigued and question and grow, and what it takes to get me to give up bad habits. And God knows just how to deal with you (gesture), and you, and you, so that your life grows..... Things happen to people in life - some joyful, some really hard - and God is with us personally when those things happen. God doesn't say, "Oh, yeah, that's what I do for Fred, not Becky." Or, "Whoops, I just got Louise S mixed up with Louise Z." God knows how many hairs are on my head, even as hair may thin month to month. God knows when a little brown sparrow falls. God knows the number of stars, and the number of sand grains on the beaches. God's knowledge is intimate & minute, and yet also oversees the big picture of possibilities. We are called by name even within this great body of believers.

While I find this exhilarating and comforting, I also find aspects of this difficult. I cringe and want to hide when I remember that God sees me even when I'm at my worst

- envious, angry, pissed off, coveting, wanting revenge. Yes, God forgives; and at the same time God wants me to deal with those things and find grace within to not react that way. And that's harder than it sounds like. There was a woman in a former church who thought she knew Christ better than anyone else, and she'd developed the habit of these fake confessions - she'd say something about wishing someone was closer to Christ, then apologize and say, "Oh, I don't mean to judge." She got her sneers in & pretended to be sorry about it, too - it was SO obvious to the rest of us what she was doing. She had not really come to the grace of accepting that people might interact with God in different ways than herself. It takes deep soul work to recognize, admit and seek change in our inner reactions and responses.

There have been people in my various congregations who think it's alright to vent their bad temper on their fellow church members - and on their pastor, even, and plot for that pastor's removal. I don't know whether they don't realize their awful behaviors hurt others, or whether they think they're righteously right, or whether they simply have no self-control. We're seeing lots of that in the last years in our own country - people who claim to be following Christ yet act in ways Christ would never have acted, and treat people as Christ would never have done. It is hard to do the soul work of recognizing our faults, seeking healing for our own woundedness, and letting the Holy Spirit lead into changed behaviors. Those folks on Jan 6 last year seemed to think they had a righteous right to act as they did, even praying in public as they did things that wounded Christ as well as other people. Jesus manifestly resisted doing anything like an outer, physical revolution against Rome or against the Jewish leaders, although some wanted him to do that; and through history, other Christians have claimed Christ as their reason for anger and hate.

So we all have those parts inside us - Scripture calls it sin, reactions to our own needs for power, esteem, for winning over others, for being in control....whatever - these are inner sins that need to be flushed out by the work of the Spirit as we follow the Prince of Peace. Even those of us who are able to keep ourselves from actively doing obvious sins, still have to wrestle with our inner demons that we hide.

So that's why I find it difficult to realize how intimately God knows me.

I also have some difficulty realizing that all those who call on the name of Christ are my family - I really want to disassociate myself from some of them, and the way they represent the gospel. If I try and pray for them, I find myself praying that they'll discover how wrong they are, that they'll see the light and change. (Probably like they pray for me!) I have to tell myself that God is in charge, the Spirit is always working, that all of us have blind spots, and we all depend on God's grace in the end. My call is to follow what I have been shown and be faithful to what the Spirit has revealed to me. In prayer, I need to lift them in the light the way I do people I like. Inside, I may feel like that woman I mentioned a bit ago - I may be judging like crazy, even though I don't let the words out. Sometimes I want to invent new words for faith so I'm not labeled with the faith words these other folks use. Some I'd like to cut from the family. So that's among my ongoing struggles.

Still, the truth remains that we are both known individually by God AND joined in this body of Christ called the capital-C Church. In the Scriptures assigned to the upcoming Sundays, the apostle Paul has some constructive things to say about this body of Christ that challenge without offending. We'll look at those.

My last point is that we ought not to be confused about what and who God is, either. God isn't confused about us - any confusion about who or what God is, needs to be cleared up. In the words we read from the prophet Isaiah (in The Message), God asks, "Why do you spend your money on junk food, and your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?" I really like Peterson's translation there. True soul nutrition and the best soul foods come from God - other things that make promises about life and fulfillment are like bad but glittery ads trying to sell what's really junk. Don't confuse the two - God's life is free for the taking, and the best possible life. God is the north star for purpose and direction; God's words plant and nourish real life. Don't be fooled by fancy wrappings around empty nutrition - other things can't fill our soul like God can. Other loves cannot take God's place; other things we spend our \$\$ on can't fill our soul. Our profession doesn't save us, even being a pastor or a Bible teacher. Only God. Don't be confused. God isn't.

AMEN