Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Memorial, was explaining to a TV interviewer why her remarkable work has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. “It’s the names,” she said, “the names are the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names.” She is right. If you, like me, have ever watched the annual 9/11 memorials, you can’t help but remember the power of hearing the names read aloud of those who lost their lives on that tragic day.

In this age in which we live we are as likely to be identified by numbers as our names. When this is done by design, it can be every bit as devastating a form of identity theft as having someone who steals your credit card or social security number. When I used to visit the Juvenile Detention Center, I couldn’t help but notice that every time a group of children entered or left a room they had to count off to make sure that no one was missing. My friend, Ralph Hughley, who was the chaplain there, was successful at breaking through the most crusty resistance of some very tough kids because he alone called them by name. There is power in being known by your name.

Like my friend Ralph, God doesn’t substitute numbers for names. In the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, the prophet speaks for God, writing, “I have called you by name, you are mine”. In this passage, the fact that God has named Israel makes all the difference. It is a guarantee of so much. It reminds the people of their divine origin, of being created and formed by YHWH. It banishes fear and announces salvation. It offers God’s protection in fire and flood. In scripture, being called by one’s name is a rich gift.

But there is more than just being known personally. YHWH goes on to remind Israel that the name she bears is YHWH’s name. It’s a little like carrying both a given name and a family name. The first name makes me special because I’m me. The second tells me I’m not only me, but to whom I belong. It tells me that I have a name to live up to and to take responsibility for keeping it a “good name”. Names tell us we are loved and call us into accountability. What greater accountability can there be than to know that we are called by God’s name, created for God’s glory?

I thought about names because today we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism and are invited to remember our own baptism. Whenever someone is presented for baptism, the priest asks the parents and godparents to “Name this child”. In a different way, the baptism of Jesus reveals his name to us.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism is very sparse. After he came out of the water Mark describes three things that happened. The heavens were torn apart, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased.” With these signs and words, God tells us that
Jesus is his Anointed One, the one who would take up the mission given to Israel, God’s chosen people, to be a light to the nations so all people will be drawn to God’s healing community.

In your baptism and mine, we, too, received more than our given names. We were told that you and I are each God’s beloved child, special to him, loved before we were even conceived in our mother’s wombs and precious to God for all eternity.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest and prolific spiritual writer, had a near death experience when he was hit by a car while walking on a country road. Reflecting on that experience when he literally found himself hanging between life and death, Nouwen spoke of seeing life from a new perspective. Instead of viewing his life purpose as an effort to please God and earn God’s favor, Nouwen saw life for the first time from the top down—saw himself as God’s beloved child, loved before all time, without condition.

In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen wrote, “The great spiritual battle begins—and never ends—with the reclaiming of our chosenness. Long before any human being saw us, we are seen by God’s loving eyes. Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love.”

In his baptism, Jesus heard the truth that he is the Beloved One, loved by God and freed to love others. We, too, received this affirmation in baptism. No matter what messages the world gives concerning our worthiness or lack of worth, the truth about us is that you and I are beloved children of God. We are those in whom God delights, called into God’s family.

When we can hear this word about ourselves, we don’t have to be preoccupied with making ourselves look important to others or view others as threats to us. Nouwen wrote, “When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their chosenness. Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God’s eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God’s heart.”

Hearing that we are God’s beloved children, we are free to live as Jesus did. We can follow Jesus even to the cross, laying down our lives for others as he did, secure in the promise that as we die with Christ in baptism we will surely be raised with him in the resurrection. Because we have been baptized into Christ, we are free to live courageously, to seek to overcome evil with love, to forgive as we have been forgiven. For after meeting us in the water, Jesus meets us in every circumstance and season of life, even in the moment of death. Even there Jesus is with us, announcing that the battle’s outcome is sure, that death itself has been swallowed up by life. It is in that hope that I invite you to remember your baptism today and every day. And remember this especially, God knows you by name and is pleased that you bear the name of Christ. You are his beloved child with whom he is well pleased.