Before Billy and I got married, I thought a lot about whether I should change my name. I was 51 years old and had not been married before. My name had always been Linda Sue Mitchell. For better or worse, this was my identity. It was the name my parents gave me and it connected me with generations of Mitchells who could be traced back to the late 1700's when a Lutheran pastor named Johann Peter Mischler (later changed to Mitchell) arrived in the port of Philadelphia. I asked Billy what he thought I should do: stay Mitchell forever or change my last name to Motley. He told me it didn't matter to him and that it was completely up to me. I went back and forth. Professionally, I was Linda Mitchell; would that cause confusion in church circles with people who had known me for decades by that name? Did I want to go through the hassle of changing my Social Security card, driver's license, every account that had my name on it? I decided that it would be easier to just keep my maiden name. Billy was fine with that. But a few days before the wedding, I changed my mind. I was only going to do this marriage thing once. Why not go the route of tradition and tie my name to Billy's for the rest of my life? We were becoming a family, Billy and I, and I felt it was worth the bother to link ourselves together in this visible way.

I decided not to tell Billy right away. I wanted it to be a surprise. Maybe I would ask the minister to pronounce us Billy and Linda Motley at the end of the wedding service. That was a possibility, but I wanted to do something more fun, even whimsical. I thought and thought and finally came up with a plan. I went to Walmart, to one of those machines in the front of the store that you can use to print dog tags. I picked out one in the shape of a heart, then had “Lily Motley” stamped on it. I took it home and put it on the collar of my, and soon to be Billy's, dog, Lily. When Billy arrived in Blacksburg a couple of days before the wedding, I waited anxiously to see if he would notice Lily's new tag. He didn't, so we had to play a sort of activity, a “What's different about Lily?” game that finally got him to notice the little detail of her new tag. I think I teased him by saying that Lily was changing her name but I wasn't but before long, it was official. I now go by Linda Mitchell Motley professionally but still have many colleagues who call me Linda Mitchell. That's OK, for in reality both Mitchell and Motley define me.

We all know the power of names. Being given the name of a family member connects us to that person even if he or she died before we were born. Some people grow up with names they can't stand and change them as soon as they can. Others are proud of their names and pass them along to their children and their children's children; hence three generations in my family with my father's middle name Owen. Others sometimes come up with names for us that are less formal; they can be great compliments or carry the sting of a whole hive of bees. Sissy. Four eyes. Loser. Nerd. We all know the power of those kinds of names.

When Jesus arrived at the Jordan, he already had the power of many names resting on his shoulders: Emmanuel, which means “God with us” and Jesus whose meaning is “God saves.” Prince of Peace. Counselor. Christ. Lord. Son of God. Son of Man. Lamb of God. These are the names the faithful had given him, many long before he was born. But at the Jordan, Jesus received a new name. After he had been baptized, just as he was coming out of the water, Matthew tells us that the heavens were opened. Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on him. Then he heard a voice coming from above and saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” All the other names fit Jesus beautifully, but this one seemed to have extra weight. My Beloved. This name came directly from God and expressed God's delight in God's Son. It cemented the relationship between Father and Son. It assured Jesus that God would always be with him, even in the hardest days ahead. My Beloved. It reminded Jesus of the deep and mysterious connection Jesus had and would always have with his Father.

Matthew tells that that immediately after his baptism, after he received this new name, My Beloved, Jesus was sent into the wilderness for 40 days. There he would go without food or water and be tempted by the devil, who promised Jesus' life would be much easier if he would just submit to him, allow his life to be ruled by the devil and not by God. There in the wilderness, Jesus could remember the promises of his Father, could still feel the water dripping down his back, could hear the voice of God, “You are my Beloved.” From that most desolate place, Jesus would emerge stronger than ever, more assured that his life was determined by God's plan and that God would never betray or leave him. Once Jesus' destiny was revealed his fight with the forces of evil could begin.

My Beloved. In just two words, the name assures those who receive it that they will be connected to the first Beloved forever. When you and I are baptized, we receive the same name Jesus received from the heavens at the Jordan. No matter what happens to us from that point, no matter how many times we change our name or others call us names, we are always God's Beloved. Isn't it amazing that whatever we do in our lives, good or bad, that delight, that deep saturating love of God never leaves us? By calling us by the same name he gives to his Son, God makes us sisters and brothers with Jesus, connects us to Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and forgives every one of our sins, not just the ones we bring to the font, but every sin we will ever commit. Then, when you and I are thrown into the wilderness, when evil seems destined to take over our lives, we can remember this: We are God's daughters and sons, God's Beloveds forever, no matter what choices we make or don't make, no matter what forces threaten us or knock us off our feet.

When you go home today, look at yourself in the mirror as you wash your face or your hands. Feel the water splash on your skin and remember, you are baptized in the name of Christ and you are God's Beloved. No matter what. Forever.

Amen.

*Baptism Jesus A*

*January 8, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 3:13-17*