

PRECIOUS

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Isaiah 43:1-7

I have a friend who works for the church. He is not a minister, but instead serves at the upper levels of the denomination. He and his wife have four children. Three of their kids are their biological children. The oldest is 15, the youngest is 11—two boys and a girl. Their fourth child is a young girl that they adopted just a year-and-a-half ago. The girl is Haitian. She is 8 years old.

I was asking my friend about his family and he confided that raising the fourth child has been extremely difficult. Unlike the other children, she lies, she steals, she is manipulative, and can be cruel. This may sound like a nightmare but there is a reason for her behavior. Before being adopted, the girl was an orphan and she spent her first seven years of life in orphanages in Haiti. Her behavior is not the result of negative personality traits; they are her survival skills, the product of growing up alone.

Let's assume a best-case scenario—that the people who ran these orphanages where the girl lived were good, caring people. Even then, their goal was simply to keep the children in their care alive until an adoptive family could be located. It wasn't their job to love the children—just care for them. You can imagine that in an orphanage in an impoverished nation such as Haiti that food would be an issue. Was there always enough food for each child? Was there ever the possibility that food would run out before all were fed? A child living in that situation would learn to manipulate the system to their best interests. In addition to food, there is the matter of possessions. Possessions would be shared and could be taken away. In that environment, one's entire being would be constructed on the continually shifting sands of uncertainty depending on how well one learned to work the system. As my friend explained, the way his daughter acts is not her fault; it's not his fault. It just is.

Consider our own children. Realistically, they want for nothing. They have food, clothing, toys, entertainment. They are surrounded by family and friends. There can be no doubt that they are loved.

My friend tells me that when people observe his kids playing that they comment on how well things are going, how smoothly the new daughter fits in. He tells me that what they don't see is how he and his wife are continually pulling the daughter aside to adjust her behavior. "No, you can't do that," "No, we do it this way." Their greatest challenge is to help their daughter override her baser instincts and teach her to live in a family, to who her that, yes, she is loved. Accomplishing this will

demand constant supervision, behavior adjustments, and probably even some discipline, as appropriate. My prayers are with my friend and his family.

On the church calendar, today is the day we call Baptism of the Lord Sunday, a day to commemorate Jesus' baptism. As you will recall, before Jesus began his public ministry, his cousin John was preaching outside of Jerusalem in the Judean wilderness. John invited people to be baptized in the Jordan River. Some people thought that John might be the Messiah they were hoping for. John insisted that no, he was not the Messiah. He told them, *The one you are searching for is more powerful than I and will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* Jesus came to John with a request to be baptized. As Jesus emerged from the water of the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit fell upon him and a voice from heaven proclaimed, *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* <Luke 3:15-22> These are the words that every person longs to hear, that we belong to someone, that we are loved. It is what God conveys to Jesus. It is also what God conveys to God's people, as we see in our reading for today.

You will recall from my sermon series on Ezra and Nehemiah how in the 6th century BC the Babylonian empire defeated Judea, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried many of the people into captivity in Babylon. Having suffered this tragedy, these people believed at all was lost. Their nation was defeated, their king dead, their capital city demolished, the people scattered. In the midst of this chaos they wondered if they had lost their God as well? Was God lost when the temple was leveled? Did God disappear when the temple was destroyed? For those carried off to Babylon, was God even still with them? Or were they now orphaned?

Isaiah was one of those Jews carried back to Babylon. Among his people he was regarded as a prophet because of his message of comfort and consolation. He preached that God was indeed with them, even in captivity, and that the time of their exile would come to an end and they would return to Jerusalem. In our reading for today, we find a beautiful example of his words of hope and promise.

In the words of the prophet that we read today, the first thing Isaiah does in this passage is to remind the people that God created them, God claims them, and God knows them by name. No matter what obstacles stand before them, God will be at their sides. They can ford rivers and not be swept away; they can walk through fire and not be burned. The Lord is their God and they are so valuable that God offers Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba as their ransom. Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba were powerful, prosperous nations at that time. Judea, on the other hand, did not even exist as a country. Yet God will pay a valuable ransom for them. It is like a parent saying to a child, "I will do anything for you."

Then God tells these people that they are precious. *You are precious in my sight, you are honored, I love you. I will always be with you. You do not need to fear. You*

will return to your homes. I will gather your lost and scattered people from the four corners of the earth.

What does it mean to be precious? The Hebrew word here means something that is valuable. In scripture it is used to describe building materials. A house can be built with mud and straw but a house built with components that are precious is something else. It would be made of stone. It would have a roof constructed with wood from the cedar trees of the forests of Lebanon. To be precious to God is to be constructed of the finest materials. *You are precious in my sight.*

For us, the English word precious originates with the Latin word *pretium* which means price. It means something that is valuable and that is cherished by us—a family heirloom, a gift. Certain metals and stones are precious because they are rare and special.

Because God sees us as precious, God offers us baptism. For Christians, baptism is a ritual signifying our joining the church—the body of Christ, becoming part of God’s family. In our baptism we celebrate that God has claimed us as God’s own. As the Reformers put it, baptism is a sign and a seal of the covenant of grace which God makes through Jesus. It is extended to his followers. As a sign, it is something performed publically for all to see. We don’t hide our baptism; we proclaim it. As a seal, it is the mark of God on our souls that identifies us as belonging to God. As one Presbyterian scholar puts it, “In baptism, God claims us as beloved children and members of Christ’s body, the church, washing us clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God.”¹

At the start of a new year, on this day of baptism, we can celebrate that God holds us as precious. We may have made mistakes, we may have sinned, but God continues to love us. God is there urging us on, picking us up when we fall, leading us back to the path when we wander.

On this day of baptism, I think about my friend and his daughter and the journey that is before them. He is confident that in God’s eyes he is precious. He and his wife want to share that feeling with someone who may not know it, to do what they can to express God’s love. I ask that you join with me in keeping this family in your prayers.

Lastly, I give thanks for the work of the people of this congregation as you reach out in different ways to those who may not feel God’s love. Through your words and actions and giving, you are speaking God’s language and saying very clearly, *You are precious.* You are a blessing. Amen.

¹ <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/1/21/what-presbyterians-believe-baptism/>. Accessed January 11, 2019.