

I read something quite profound this week and many of my thoughts this morning are coming from an essay by W. Carter Lester.

Isaiah 43 But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

A teen goes to their first day of highschool and during lunch period wonders where they should sit among this sea of strange faces. They wonder where they fit in, which clubs to join, and know that anything they say can be made fun of.

“A woman walks down the hall in her empty house to look at her daughter’s bedroom. The bedroom contains pictures and souvenirs of childhood and high school, left behind when this youngest daughter set off for her first year of college. Now the mother wonders what lies ahead---not just for her daughter but for herself, suddenly cut adrift.”

An older man sighs, flipping the channels of the TV. He had enjoyed his years as a shop teacher, always able to make the perfect cut in the metal. But now

he has chronic pain that leaves him lethargic, with nothing to show for his days.

He feels worthless.

A young single woman badly scars her face in a car accident. She's ashamed of her appearance and doesn't know where to turn.

“A younger man drives toward his hometown. He has been away for two years in a minimum-security prison for misappropriating money at work. His time in prison has ended, but he wonders if the true penalty he must bear for his wrongdoing is a lifetime sentence.”

“The questions who am I? and where do I belong? What makes me worthy? rise up to the surface when we are adolescents but never really go away. Whether we ask them explicitly or only subconsciously we look in the wrong places for our answers: in our roles, our work, our peer groups, or our accomplishments and acquisitions. Ultimately what we need to hear, according to Isaiah is how God gives us value and identity.”

Value? The nation of Israel at this time in their history was short on it. They were a small band of desert people subject to the Babylonians, who were mighty in wealth and number. The people are beaten down, emotionally scarred, and without hope that their future will be better. God has permitted all kinds of terrible things to happen to them in conquered state. But then these words from the prophet Isaiah tell them that they are highly valued by God.

Who are they? They are precious beloved children of God; created by God, formed by God, and redeemed by God. If they took a good look at themselves they would feel worthless, small, and not really worthy of respect to the nations around them. But Isaiah tells them they valued by God.

Where do they belong? They belong to the LORD's. They are called by name. Verse 1, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." In fact Isaiah tells them that God says that God would trade the wellbeing of all the other nations in exchange for them. "I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life." The message for Israel is that God loves you so much that God would sacrifice everything else as if it were junk. Israel, you are more valuable than everything else combined. It's startling because Isaiah is saying that God want their freedom so much that God is willing for others to suffer. God is willing to sell off the whole world.

What makes them worthy? Nothing. God gives them this value, not because they deserve it. Just one chapter earlier, God expresses anger over their sins, disappointment in the irreparable damage that they have called, and speaks of their judgment. But instead of abandoning them forever, God comes to them, initiates restoring their relationship, and gives them grace that costs.

For us, with the good news of the gospel, the boundaries between nations are gone. We are all Israel. Every nation of the earth is bought at the expense of the “nations.” There is no boundary of skin color, gender, nationality, or denomination. All are loved with an exclusive all out, I just want you at the expense of all else love.

So, Who are we? Where do we belong? What makes us worthy? Your identity is not found in your role, or your vocation. It may be tough to swallow because we think about those things so much and wrap ourselves up in them. They are good things in themselves, but if we pursue them too hard and make the good things the ultimate thing we will inevitably be hurt and hurt others.

Our identity as a congregation can't come from our size relative to the Baptist and Christian churches or our relative wealth. We belong to God. That is our identity as individuals and as a community of faith.

Where do we belong? I bet we base that on whether we are being accepted by our peers. Both you and I know that we shouldn't do that, but how do we stop? Can we do better?

What makes us worthy? We are tempted to look to our achievements as individuals and our congregational budget as a church. We know we shouldn't.

The words, from Isaiah compel us to a better way of seeing ourselves. “I have called you by name, you are mine. When you walk through the waters....I will be with you.”

We know that God says all this, but it is hard for us to get it through our heads. Today is baptism of the Lord Sunday. Some of came to our Lenten bible study last year, when we talked about baptism. We handed out stones and passed a bowl of water around. Take a stone, write your name on it and dip it in the bowl. When you dip it in, say I am a child of God. When you pass it to the next person say Mary, you are a child of God, remember your baptism and be thankful. Why do we do that? Because, we have identity problems. It’s so very hard to get it through our heads Who we really are, Where we really belong, and What really makes us worthy.

When we baptize a baby we claim that that person should say to themselves the rest of their lives, I am a child of God. Martin Luther it is said used to say to himself Martin, remember that you are baptized. Martin Luther had to do it, and that baby grows up and needs to be reminded they are a child of God, because “Some people” are going to call to say that that child’s identity is a nerd, or dumb jock, bossy, stupid, incompetent, or “prodigy”, “the best theological student I’ve ever seen”, “Future CEO”, “The next Michael Jordan”. The world wants to either beat us down to nothing, or give us a big head. Where is the church to tell each

and everyone of those people, actually you are neither of those, you are a child of God.

“In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked.

He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Folks you are children of God. There are sick and hurt people who been baptized in this congregation. As children of God, whose identity is wrapped up in Christ. It is your responsibility to find out who they are and remind them, you are a child of God.”

Is there anyone who has been baptized in this congregation, who is away at college, or in the nursing home, or working in another city. How about calling

them up and reminding them that they are children of God. We have a member in prison. We have a man who has visited here who is in prison. Don't you know they are struggling with their identity? Visit, call, or write, whatever you can do. Tell them to remember who they really are, children of God. Tell them to remember their baptisms.

As children of God, think big. There was a young man in our community who had a terrible car accident and the insurance won't pay for a glass eye. Don't you think he's struggling with his identity right now? Don't you think the church ought to be helping people like that, helping to pay for their surgery, with the message you are a beloved child of God?

We are the beloved children of God. The comforting words of Isaiah are easy to read. They are much more difficult to allow to sink into our hearts. Remember you are called by name, remember that you are baptized, and not alone but you are God's beloved alongside of many. Share the good news.

Benediction

Children of God, remember that you have been baptized and rejoice. Find someone else this week and tell them who they are and to remember their baptism. If you never have been baptized, then find a church and claim your inheritance. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit go in peace. AMEN