

“Named and Claimed”
Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17 and 21-22
First Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2016
Rev. Glen Bell

Our lives end where they begin, here at the font.

This week I am reeling from the death of Jean McKown Dempsey, the gracious, gifted lady who was such a leader in our church. Week after week, season after season, she would volunteer in our church office, answering the phones, responding to needs, presenting a witness of love and grace to all who entered our doors.

When I prayed with the family at her bedside in the intensive care unit, when I prayed with her daughter a couple of hours after her death, our refuge was the deep truth proclaimed by this morning’s scripture, read just a few moments ago by Margaret/Yvonne.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

No distress, no challenge, no difficulty, no illness, no loss, not even death, can separate us from God’s love, for we have been named and claimed by the Lord. The Lord of the universe, the Holy One, is our Savior.

Here at the font this morning, Kade / Petra / Olivia will be washed, signed and sealed in God’s grace, forever marked as God’s own. Whether we are 95 years old – or nine weeks or nine months old, we profess that’s God gracious presence is deep and strong and true. God will never let us go.

Carter Lester is the co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. He writes this:

- “A new student looks out on a sea of strange faces in the high school cafeteria, wondering where he should sit, which group he should join, how he will be received.
- “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, 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.

- “An older man groans in his sick bed. Retirement from his successful law practice had been difficult. But now he has been felled by a chronic illness that leaves him lethargic, with nothing to show for his days. He feels worthless.

“Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? These questions never really go away. We often look for the answers in the wrong places, in our roles, our work, our peer groups, or our accomplishments and acquisitions. Ultimately, none of these can deliver what we need. What we need is to hear how God gives us identity and value.”

I had just started serving my first church in eastern North Carolina, and I didn’t know what I was doing. I met a young man, a son of the church, who was just tentatively beginning to come back to the worship and fellowship of the congregation after being away in prison. We got together and talked. We played racquetball together. His identity began to unfold before my eyes. He blossomed like the most exquisite flower. He dedicated himself as a father and a community leader. He became a deacon and then the treasurer of the congregation.

God’s redeeming love brought him back home to his baptism.

I believe, for many of us, our most common struggle is that we feel lost. Oh, we know who we are. We spent some time on ancestry.com and can name our foremothers and forefathers back ten generations. And we know where we are. We turn to our smartphone at any instant, and the GPS tells us our exact location. I expect I was foolish for wanting our children, as teenagers, to learn how to read a paper map and determine their whereabouts.

But in the midst of the lives, all too busy or all too empty, we feel lost.

God invites us to come home, to listen again to the divine voice, “I am the Lord your God, your Savior. I have called you by name.”

We are going to call Kade’s / Petra’s / Olivia’s name in just a few more minutes. On behalf of almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Kade / Petra / Olivia will be washed clean from sin and death – and set free to serve the risen Christ, to discover and embrace her true identity.

Then the church, not this room in the building and in the years ahead, not perhaps this congregation, will become his home. But for as long as Kade / Petra / Olivia is among us, it is our joyful opportunity to watch his / her identity unfold as our identity unfolds. For as we volunteer in the nursery, serve as table parents in LOGOS or teachers in church school, walk along our youth on Sunday evenings and at conferences and mission trips, we do it not because we ought to, because we should. We do it to be who we are. Children of God.

It was a busy afternoon, and I have no memory where or why we were hurrying. But I had our youngest daughter, Rachel, safely strapped into her car seat, and we were almost to the drive thru window at the McDonald’s. And Rachel started talking about her baptism. “Jan Dykster put water on my head!” she chortled. She remembered the story of our standing together at the font, while my friend and colleague Jan welcomed her with the outward, visible sign of the inward, invisible grace.

You see, the inner and invisible makes all the difference. Love. Forgiveness. Patience. Forbearance. Joy. Delight. These don't come on schedule, and often it feels like they don't come on time. But they are the experiences that will make all the difference for Ryken and Kade and Petra and Olivia. They are the experiences that remind us who we are.

This day, this week, I invite you to lean forward in expectation and to live into your baptism. Let us live out the example of Jean McKown Dempsey, who was a witness of love and grace to all.

One last story: Robert McAfee Brown remembers the day in 1960 when he participated in a worship service in East Berlin. There were not many people present in worship, for church attendance was viewed with suspicion by the state. Nevertheless, there was a young couple there, presenting their child for baptism. Robert McAfee Brown was amazed.

“Why?” he wondered. “Why would they jeopardize their reputation and their future by insisting on this ancient ritual of baptism, when a convenient, secular alternative was readily available? The couple did not have to answer the question. Their very act of bringing their baby to the church was a public statement of their priorities. They engaged in significant risk because of their significant faith.”

May Kade / Petra / Olivia grow in grace into a significant, life-changing faith, one that transforms him / her and all those around him / her.

And as we love him / her, as we live into our baptism, let us follow the Christ. Let us carry the cross into our city and neighborhood and home. Let us work for peace and justice. Let us share the good news of Jesus and invite our friends to join us in church around this font.

Let us remember we are named and claimed by our Savior, the Lord our God.