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8/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, baptismal identity

Our identity: Precious, honored, loved

by Emily Anne Carson

What do you tell yourself when you look in the mirror or at a selfie or an unfiltered photo of yourself? Pay attention to that voice. It shapes your sense of reality.

In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapter 43, God tells the people (through the voice of Isaiah) that they are precious, honored and loved. At the time, the people were probably feeling terrible because they were living in exile. There was grief, loss, poverty, and a sense of alienation. Into that place of brokenness, God offers words of compassion.

In Hebrew (the original language of the Old Testament), the words used in Isaiah, chapter 43 are yaqar (precious), kabad (honored) and ahab (loved).

You are precious.

You are honored.

You are loved.

We don't always feel precious, honored and loved. In fact, we often don't feel that way. The original audience of Isaiah likely didn't feel the truth of God's words either. But what if we just keep saying them to ourselves anyway? On days when we feel like it, and more commonly, on days when we don't. Transformation happens in repetition. Precious, honored and loved. These aren't your feelings; they are your identity.

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You are precious.

You are honored.

You are loved.

From the Order for Holy Baptism, the presiding minister recites, "Pour out your Holy Spirit, the power of your living Word, that those who are washed in the waters of baptism may be given new life."

Baptism is new life. Through water, we are connected to the ultimate Source of All Things. The same Spirit that moved over the waters at the beginning of time is sealed within us and emboldens us with eternal, everlasting love.

You are precious.

You are honored.

You are loved.

What would it look like to inhabit a world where everybody believed they were precious? What if they really, deeply understood that to be true? How much would our collective capacity for love increase if we were able to love ourselves wholeheartedly?

Friends, gently pay attention to the voice you hear when you see yourself. Don't judge that voice. Don't get mad at it. Just turn toward it. And offer that voice a gift of encouragement. Kindly whisper precious, honored and loved when you catch a glimpse of your reflection.

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You are precious.

You are honored.

You are loved.

This is your identity. This is your legacy. This is Truth. Precious, honored and loved. Now and forever.

Closing prayer:

Spirit of God, You call us precious. You call us honored. You call us loved. Help us see what you see. Empower us to look upon our own image with ongoing, daily compassion. Strengthen us to pay attention to the voices inside our own minds and offer them the gift of gentle grace. May our increasing capacity to love our own reflection compel us to look upon the rest of your creation with the same heart. Thank you for our forever identity in You. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. The essay opens with the question, "What do you tell yourself when you look in the mirror or at a selfie or an unfiltered photo of yourself?" What are some of the reflex messages you tell yourself upon seeing your own reflection? Where might these messages come from?
2. You are precious. You are honored. You are loved. This is your eternal identity. How might you incorporate these truths into your daily life? When you're tempted to forget, how might you remind yourself and one another?
3. In the waters of baptism, you were sealed with an eternal love and everlasting identity. What is the role of baptism in the life of your congregation and family unit? Brainstorm together about some ways you might incorporate the anniversary of your baptism into your life and routines (and if applicable, the rhythms of your small group)?

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08/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic, baptismal identity

Troubled waters: Our baptismal identity

by Angela T. Khabeb

“Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.” (John 5:2–9)

In John's Gospel we learn about a man with severe physical limitations. He is lying by the pool of Bethesda in hopes of being healed. At the pool of Bethesda, an angel of the Lord would come down at a certain season and would “trouble the waters.” And whoever made it into the waters first would be healed.

Great news, right?

That is unless you are the second, sixth, or 28th to get to the water.

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Jesus finds this man and asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" The man explains that he wants to be healed but due to limited mobility, he cannot get to the water quickly enough. Jesus tells the man to "Take up your bed and walk." The man obeys and is healed... but on the Sabbath.

This story is about how only a few who could get to the pool first would be healed. Jesus intervenes to bring healing to a man who had been waiting for 38 years. Jesus' actions put his own life in jeopardy—healing on the Sabbath angers the religious leaders and they want Jesus to pay with his life. Troubled waters indeed!

My husband Benhi was baptized in his home country, Namibia. Namibia is a country in southern Africa and when Benhi was baptized, Namibia was under Apartheid rule. Benhi was baptized as an infant in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia. But his parents were forced to give him the "Christian" name—James. The same was true for each of his 12 siblings. They all were forced to take "Christian" names: Amanda, Douglas, Evelyn, Jeffery and Sylvia, etc. These names are not "Christian." These names are Eurocentric.

This is an example of God's gift of baptism being controlled by a system that is unjust. People were forced to abandon their culture and language in the name of the very God who created them. But the good news for us today is that the ground is level at the font. Baptism is God's gift to humanity. All are equal regardless of race or nationality. It is a second birth that is open to all.

In Titus 3:3–7, Paul gives us a wonderful illustration of what happens to us in our baptism:

"For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray... But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water (washing) of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

In this passage, we learn that through baptism, we are washed and regenerated. I heard a preacher once who said that through baptism we are given a new DNA, that we are regenerated, at least in the spiritual sense. Although we are both saint and sinner, the power of the Holy Spirit living in us points our feet to the path of active hope. It is the Holy Spirit's power that enables us to live into a life that is alive to God in Jesus Christ.

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Paul also provides vivid baptismal imagery in his letter to the Romans. We encounter baptism as being buried with Christ.

“Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3–11)

Through baptism, we are a new creation. We are heirs of the marvelous treasure of eternal life. The Holy Spirit's cleansing power begins the work of sanctification in us. Through Spirit-filled lives, we become shining lights for others who are journeying with us. The Triune God is fully present in our lives. Our baptismal identity means that we are claimed by God and marked with the cross of Christ forever!

Discussion questions:

1. The waters of baptism have been referred to as “storied waters.” What's your baptismal story? How does your baptismal identity influence your daily life?
2. Some people use daily routines such as bathing to remember their baptism. What are other ways we can remember our gift of baptism? (Try to think beyond our usual worship settings.)
3. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). We are baptized into God's family as children of God. But we are also baptized into God's kingdom as ministers of the royal priesthood. What are some ways our identity as Children of God can lead us into active ministry? How can we share our identity as God's children with others?

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