

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, September 29 2013

“Holy Priorities”

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

This month, for the cover of the newsletter, I submitted a poem I had written reflecting on Annabelle’s baptism two weeks ago. It was a joyous occasion. I felt so much love and hope and promise sent forth from the congregation and bounced back by her radiant smile. And the joy continued downstairs during the shower for the new baby to come. It seemed like the whole community felt so blessed to be able to celebrate new life in our midst and hope for the future.

I got the sense that we were not just celebrating one baby, and one baptism, but we were in some way also celebrating being a community that has baptisms, and a community that anticipates new things on the way.

To capture this renewed hope and rebirth in the poem, I used images that I’ve heard from you in different ways of the hopelessness and anxiety and fear that some members of this community have felt in the past about the life of this congregation. But I have seen and felt the renewal of hope in my time here.

We have a rich history in this place; you did before I came, and your families and our ancestors in faith built that history before you. But we also have a future. And there has been some anxiety in recent history about what that future might look like, or even if there would be a future. But what I have seen over and over again in my time with you, and which shone like a beacon on the Sunday of the baptism, is that that anxiety is melting away. We have seen a vision of new life in this place.

This renewed joy in our lives together is what I hoped to communicate to you in that poem, and I regret that some of my words may have landed the wrong way. It is a challenge for us to move forward if we won’t see where we’ve been.

But then, it is hard to be honest about where we are, or who we are, when there are messages coming at us from all sides about what we should *really* be doing (“start a contemporary service, with a praise band!”), what we should buy in order to be someone we think we should be, how we should look, who we should care about; messages thrown at communities and at us as individuals, making us question who we really are and what is important.

We say in our baptisms, you are a child of God; and then we leave the church and suddenly the TV says, you're not pretty enough, you're not rich enough. And the newspaper says, you haven't done enough. And the internet says, you're too old, you're not hip enough, your friends are doing cooler things than you are. And everywhere ads say, buy more things, so you can be happy.

And God saying, "you are my beloved child," kind of gets drowned out in the swarm.

But that's what Paul – or, probably, Paul's disciple – is trying to remind us in the letter to Timothy. Timothy is a young pastor, so he's getting advice all over the place. And here the writer is talking on the surface about money. But if you'll notice, the writer doesn't say anything about money itself being good or bad – he says the *love* of money is the root of evil, and it is *striving* to be rich that causes suffering. The virtue here is contentment, he says. Be happy with what you have.

And then he tells Timothy, "take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." We usually think of "eternal life" as some abstract, far-off concept – surely that's just poetic language, or it means something about going to a place like heaven, or whatever it is it certainly won't happen until we die. Except, to hear this writer tell it, eternal life, the "life that really is life," is something that's within our reach, now! And, in particular, this eternal life to which we've been called is somehow an *alternative* to the love of money.

It is as if he's saying, striving for worldly things is making you miserable and causing suffering for people around you. Just relax. You can take hold of the life that *God* has given you, and be content. Remember who you are. Remember that God has chosen you, as we all have been chosen in baptism, and you don't have to listen to all those other voices that make you doubt your identity as God's child.

If we can take this promise seriously – that we have been chosen in baptism as children of God – then everything else just falls into place. Suddenly it's not so important that we've got the newest gadget or the perfect shoes or droves of new members. Not that those things are bad, even – just that they're not worth sacrificing our happiness for. God's life that we are given is faith, love, endurance, gentleness, and *enoughness*.

It is hard to believe, sometimes, that God gives us enough. That God *has* given us enough. We forget, we let the other voices drown out God's voice, we just don't see it. We can start to just let life happen to us, and stop reaching out to the eternal life that's within our grasp.

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Some of you also read on my blog this week that I've been battling depression. It's been around for a while, but this last year has been particularly difficult as I adjust to a new place and a whole new career, and I've been diagnosed with Bipolar. I'm getting treatment, and it's been helping. But what has really helped, and why I tell you this now, is that I've been reminded that this beast, this demon, is not me. That I am a child of God, and I can fight this. This is just one more voice in the cacophony telling me I'm not good enough, and I'm yelling back that I have better things to do. I have the gospel to preach and a community to lead.

And what I want to tell you is that you are also children of God. You can reach out and grab this eternal life that we have glimpsed, lay claim to this identity, and all those other voices shouting for our attention, trying to get you to shift your eyes off the important stuff, all those voices start not to matter so much. Because you're a child of God, and that's enough.

And we've got a good thing here, don't we? Everything we've been through as a community has brought us closer together, made us stronger, and brings out what we do best. Our activities start to look different, but the patterns are there. No matter whether it's a coffee hour, or a church supper, or a baby shower, we know how to do hospitality. And as we try to extend our welcome wider and wider, those skills are essential, and they are familiar. We know how to support one another. I have felt that from you, and I have seen you take care of one another. As the faces and the details change, we can continue to just care for one another.

We care about worship, and preaching, and study. And as we try out different classes and different formats, some which succeed and some which will fail, the shape changes but the essence is the same. We study scripture, and listen for the Word of God. Same as we have always done.

We remember mission. And as the needs around us change, and we recognize new mission activities in our community, the details change but the calling is the same. We see new opportunities to be involved with people and issues that have not faced us before, and the work changes but the love and care is the same.

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I know that sometimes the details of my own self feel new and different in this place. Whether it's my tattoos, or word choice, or sexuality, or love of nerdy TV shows, I know that I don't look like a pastor for many of you, and that takes some adjusting to on all sides.

But I'm realizing that this reality of my self is powerful for people who are not served by

the church as it is, or the way they perceive the church to be. For people who have seen the church as disconnected from the modern, “real” world, I am proof this reality is changing. People who have said to me, I don’t really go to church but I’d love to hear you speak sometime.

But that same disjuncture – where for some people it is a positive thing that I don’t look like a pastor – presents some difficulties when you’re looking from the other side. Because, I don’t look like a pastor.

And there’s nothing I can say that will smooth out that tension, because that is the present reality of the church in the modern world. However you want to describe it, there is some kind of cultural disconnect that means the church as we know it and the world out there are having a really hard time talking to one another. And that is the reality of my self and the unique ministry to which I am called, somehow bridging this divide in my own self, which feels almost irreconcilable.

As we seek to welcome new and younger people in our midst, we will keep running into these places where our cultures clash and our expectations butt heads and we will be challenged. We will have to ask, what is important here? Does it matter if the church suppers become Saturday brunches or the hymn selections widen and we sing a song in Spanish, or if the makeup of our families starts to change? Or can we still love one another, preach the gospel, and love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls?

The details might change. Will change. But the gospel, the calling of God on our lives, will not change, and that is the important part.

We’ve got something special here. And I want to assure you that as I have doubted myself sometimes and lost myself over the last few months, I have not doubted this community. You all are why I’ve stayed here in Delaware, and you all are why I want to figure out how to dwell in the midst of this clash of cultures and expectations. I love my work here, and I want to figure out how to do it in ways that will be life-giving for all of us.

As we go forward, we will continue to get voices coming at us from all sides, telling us what we should be doing, how we should be focusing our energies, who we should be reaching, who we should be. And our task will be to dig through all this muck and pick out the voice of God. We can reach out and lay claim to the identities given to us in Christ Jesus, and everything else will fall into place.

And for that, let us give thanks and praise.