

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

January 13, 2008

Precious and Beloved

Isaiah 42: 1-7; Matthew 3: 13-17

There are two letters that I received quite a while ago that I read every year around my birthday. One is a birthday card from my father that he sent me in December 1997, on my first birthday after my mother's death. He began with "Dear Karen," and then a few sentences later quoted my own words to him in the birthday card I sent him the previous year. I had forgotten my own words. My father reminded me, "Karen, in your birthday card to me last year you wrote, "You and Mom are my anchors, no matter how rough the sea, I know I can count on you." Then he continued, "Your mother will continue to be an important influence in your life, Karen, and in that sense the anchor holds . . . I cannot take her place, but you know I will always be there for you. Your mother loved you deeply, as do I." Dad.

The other letter is one I saved from December 1996. Originally I saved it by chance -- finding it in December 1997 only because I had never emptied the basket that contained all of 1996's Christmas and birthday cards. So it was a wonderful surprise when I found it, and since then I have kept it on purpose. When I received it in December 1996, I had no idea it would be the last birthday card I would receive signed by my mother, Mary Burtner. But it is. And I have read it every year since. "For a Daughter Who Means So Much" it reads on the outside, and inside are pretty Hallmark words, but the best part is a handwritten note on a piece of paper tucked inside. My parents left for their Christmas trip to Alaska on my birthday, my 40th, that year. Here is what my mother said to me, "Karen, we will be thinking of you on your big day while we are flying high

over the United States. We will miss being with you, but we will see you when we return. Your birthday has always made the holidays special. I think you were born at the perfect time. Mary and her baby. I often think of that. Have a good day. I love you. Mom.”

My mother loved me deeply. And my father still does. I am my parent’s precious and beloved daughter, and I know that. I have known that my whole life. And the fact that I have known that my whole life has made a tremendous difference in my life. I have been hurt. I have been disappointed. I have messed up. I have felt lonely. I have cried buckets of tears. I have been worried. I have been stressed out. I have been preoccupied and too busy with too many things. I have made choices I regret. I have been selfish. I have been sick. I have been angry. I have been a pain in the neck at times, I know that. But I also know that I have always been loved. I can’t remember a time in my life when I wasn’t aware of my parents’ love for me. And I understand what a blessing that is. I am forever grateful to God for my parents and their life-long love for me.

But today’s message goes farther than that. For what we affirm today is God’s love for his children. A love even more tremendous than the best love we know and experience in our human relationships. A love from heaven. A love that lasts through eternity.

Think of Israel’s situation in the 6th century B.C. Taken into exile by Babylon in 587 with the final collapse of Jerusalem, the years have plodded along. No Temple. No special community. Several generations of children have been born who would never

remember their homeland. How can they sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? The psalmist has lamented. They remember their past, the covenant God made with Abraham and the call to be God's chosen people. They remember the exodus from slavery in Egypt, the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the conquest of Canaan and their settlement in the promised land, and then eventually their development into a powerful nation under King Saul, King David and King Solomon. They remember the beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem. They remember the joy of singing psalms and bringing their offerings. They remember all that they have lost. And they weep. Why were they disobedient? Why did they forsake God and his ways? Why did they think the world and its ways would bring happiness? And so the years go by. They remember God and they weep. And then this stirring and hauntingly beautiful voice speaks, the voice of the 6th century prophet known as Second Isaiah, who speaks God's new word of hope:

“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. When 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 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...”

They are in exile; But God has not exiled them from his love. God has not forgotten them. They are still God's people. Precious and beloved.

Think now of Jesus. The glory of his birth has long since faded into his mother's memory. For 30 years he has lived with his parents, Mary and Joseph, learning his father's carpentry trade, fulfilling all the duties and responsibilities of an eldest son in a Jewish home. And then one day he goes to the river Jordan to be baptized by John. And "just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

God's Beloved Son. That's who Jesus is. And he knows who he is. He knows inside and out that he is God's Son, loved by his heavenly Father. And just think how knowing that at the very beginning of his ministry must have made all the difference to Jesus. For what came later? The temptation in the wilderness; the scorn and ridicule of many religious leaders, often the crowd's anger and misunderstanding, as well as the pressures of being sought after for his teaching and healing, and then eventually the betrayal and denial by his own disciples, his arrest and conviction, and then finally his own death on a cross. How could Jesus have gone through all that without knowing who he was and who loved him? "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In his life -- first his home life for 30 years with Mary and Joseph, then his 3 – year ministry life teaching and healing throughout Galilee and Judea, and then in his death, Jesus knew he was not alone. He belonged to God. He was God's precious and beloved Son.

And even though we are not exiled Israel and even though we are not the Messiah as Jesus was, the Savior, the Son of God, the words of Isaiah and Matthew still speak to us. They are words for our ears. They are words for our lives. The setting is different.

The purpose is perhaps different. But doesn't God still want us to know we are precious in his sight and that he loves us? Aren't we God's precious and beloved children? Do you know that? Do you believe it? Are you willing to let others know the same is true for them?

I remember visiting someone once in intensive care who was, I know, afraid to die. He had not lived a very happy life. He had not known the fellowship of the church or the friendship of Christ. He had family, but relationships were difficult. The man was painfully aware of his life's failures and shortcomings. He knew what he had missed. There were sad tears in his eyes. I read Scripture. And I talked straightforwardly. I was not threatening or condemning. I spoke of new beginnings and hope. "You are a child of God. God loves you and wants you to know him and to love him. God's Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross for you -- for your sins, for your life. With God the past is the past, God can make all things new"... I can't say for sure whether the tears of sadness turned into tears of relief and comfort, but I do think he had more hope in his heart when I left than before I came. I prayed out loud for him to accept God's forgiving love into his heart, for him to have the peace that comes from knowing we are loved by God. Whether he did or not, I never knew. But I still believed what I said to him that day was true, that his life mattered to God, that God cared for him, that he was precious in God's sight, that God loved him through and through, that he did not need to die afraid or alone because God loved him and would be with him all the way.

I had another encounter that has stayed in my mind a long time. Someone I knew outside of church – my piano teacher, actually. And for some reason, God's Spirit I am

sure, she began an interesting conversation one day after my lesson and that turned into an opportunity for real Christian sharing. She spoke of a daughter who was pursuing a seminary education at a very well known and prestigious eastern seminary. She spoke of her pride in her daughter, but also of her deep concerns. Concerns, she said, honestly to me, about women being ministers, about the church's stand of different social issues, about what Scripture does and doesn't say. Mostly I listened. And then the conversation turned, I think, to its real focus, and she began sharing some of her life's experiences and the hard road she'd traveled. She regretted, she told me, some of her history with her daughter, and how she didn't know her as well as a mother should. She regretted, she told me, how harsh and judgmental she had been at times in her life, and the hurt that had come from that. She shared a lot of the questions she had asked in her life. She shared her understanding of her own mistakes and failures. Again, I mostly listened, saying things here and there when appropriate. And then she concluded, 'but you know, no matter what's happened in my life, and no matter all I've been through and all the other questions and concerns I still might have, somehow I have always known that I am loved by God. I carry God's love with me wherever I go and whatever I do. I know without a doubt that God loves me.'

What a wonderful thing to know, friends. Not just to know it, of course, but to live it and to be empowered by it. Not just to know it, but to reflect it and share it with others. But that's another sermon for another day. Today we celebrate God's forever love. Today we hear words of comfort and hope and affirmation.

I have another story to tell now -- one I know I've shared before, so please put up with me. But before I do, I want to say that while preparing for this sermon I had in mind the different way the word "precious" is used by Gollum in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Gollum calls the ring "my precious" -- and when he says it over and over again in the movies we are aware of how his life has been destroyed by his love for that ring. It is not precious in a good way -- the ring's preciousness to Gollum has caused Gollum's destruction. This is not how we are precious to God, nor is it how any love is to be precious to us. Precious love is not meant to be an obsession; it is not meant to obscure all reason or compassion or purpose in our lives. To be precious in God's sight is a good thing -- remember that.

And now for my story -- which I hope you won't mind hearing again. It's a story about a 3-year-old red-headed boy who liked playing in the mud, even in the garden his father had just planted and warned him to stay out of. It's a story about a little boy who also liked going to church and who paid more attending to his Sunday School lessons than his parents realized. It's a story about a little boy who when scolded by his mother for playing in the newly planted garden and ordered to come inside for a bath because, as the mother put it, "You're a filthy little pig," stopped in his tracks, looked up at his mother and with the wisdom of heaven said, "I am not a filthy little pig. I am God's precious lamb."

He was right. He still got a bath, but he was right. About himself, and about all of us. Through all my years of pastoral ministry I have learned what a difference it makes for people to know what that little boy knew. That no matter what else might be said about

us, no matter what else we might even think about ourselves, no matter how much mud we've been in, and even if the mud has been caked on us for a while and we need help scraping it off, God is still calling us by name. God is still reaching out to us. God is still loving us. We are still and always precious in God's sight. We are still and always God's beloved sons and daughters, claimed by him and belonging to him forever and ever. Amen.