



5. Right Now

OPENING PRAYER

*Gracious and loving God,
as we gather to study Scripture and consider its message for us today,
we pray that, by your Spirit, you will be present with us.
As we face times of uncertainty and anxiety in our lives,
as we hear and remember voices telling us or telling others
that we have to change before we can be beloved,
we give you thanks for the clear and consistent message of the Bible
that all people are your beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children.
Amen.*

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

There are those on our campuses, in the church, and in the world who use Scripture passages quoted out of context to suggest that there are some people who—by virtue of their sexuality, gender identity, religious faith, or other factors—will have to change before God will love them.

By prayerfully studying Scripture together, Presbyterians have concluded that God has always loved all of us and will always love all of us.

Presbyterians have recognized that God has given us gifts as a faith community and as individuals. We believe we are called to identify, develop, and use those gifts to serve the world. We are confident that we can and should learn more about our world than we currently know. And we are convinced that our status as God's beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children is never in jeopardy and will never be lost.

From *Why Presbyterians Are Like That*, written by Rev. John Williams, Ph.D. Chaplain and Director of Church Relations Austin College, Sherman, Texas. Copyright © 2022 by UKirk Collegiate Ministries and the Office of Christian Formation in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

There are certain passages of Scripture that seem to suggest that our status as beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children of God may not be true for all of us at all times.

In discussing the birth of Jesus, **John 1:12** says

To all who received him, who believed in his name [Jesus] gave power to become children of God.

That language clearly suggests that our status as children of God is possible but not certain. We can “become” children of God *if* we “receive him” and “believe in his name.”

1

Similarly, in the second part of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, in **Matthew 25:41–46**, Jesus says

Then [the Son of Man] will say to those at his left hand [the “goats”], ‘You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

These familiar words from Matthew 25 can certainly be interpreted to mean that people who fail to care for hungry, thirsty, alien, naked, sick, or imprisoned persons will be sent to “eternal punishment” in the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Nevertheless, as Presbyterians have prayerfully studied the whole Bible together, we have concluded that the full witness of Scripture teaches that we are, have always been, and will always be beloved, gifted, capable, and safe—even when we fail to act as God calls and intends for us to act.

BELOVED

Consider **Isaiah 43:4**.

ISAIAH 43:4

**... you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.**

There's much to be said about this verse.

These words of comfort and assurance were originally addressed to a particular exiled, embattled community (Israel). That historic Hebrew faith community has preserved those words for centuries because they believe themselves to be directly addressed by God through this passage and all of Hebrew Scripture.

Presbyterians and other Christians also understand ourselves to be part of the community to whom these words were addressed. We believe what God said to the Israelites then also applies to us now.

By the way, a better English translation of this verse would be "*Y'all* are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love *y'all*."

One of the limits of formal English is that the second person singular pronoun and the second person plural pronoun are the same: "you." This can lead to difficulties when reading, remembering, and reflecting on some biblical passages. It is important when studying Scripture to recognize when individuals are being addressed and when words are intended for the entire community.

Think about how this distinction affects how you read **Jeremiah 29:11**.

JEREMIAH 29:11

**For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future
with hope.**

Many earnest and faithful Christians interpret this passage to mean that God has plans for them as individuals. But here in Jeremiah 29:11 the Hebrew word that is translated "for you" is "alekem." "Alekem" is a second person *plural* pronoun. A better translation of that verse would be

"I know the plans I have for *y'all*."

Some of us think "*y'all*" is very useful as a second person plural English pronoun.

Presbyterians believe we are part of the community to whom God expresses love in Isaiah 43:4 and promises a hopeful future in Jeremiah 29.

Consider the first lines of **1 John 3:1**:

1 JOHN 3:1

See what love the father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

This verse was also written to a particular community in a specific context.

Most biblical scholars believe 1 John was written (probably around the year 100 CE) to a particular Christian congregation. Through the centuries since, the church has preserved these words because we recognize continuity between that early congregation and the congregations we are part of today.

Presbyterians rejoice that, in this passage, *we* are “called children of God.”

We’re comforted and assured by the statement that “*that is what we are.*”

There is no suggestion in 1 John 3:1 that our status as children of God is in question; that it is something we should aspire to or have to earn.

Presbyterians recognize and affirm that we are children of God. Already. Right now.

All of us.

Including you.

3

GIFTED

Consider **1 Peter 4:10**.

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

Let’s unpack this verse.

“Stewards”

Like the Presbyterian Church, the word “steward” comes from Scotland.

The first animals that the nomadic clans of ancient Scotland domesticated were pigs.

It made sense. Pigs thrived in Scotland. They could find plenty to eat.

They were hearty and prospered in the rough and rugged Scottish terrain.

The clan members figured out that it was good to have pigs around. They were a good source of meat, their hides and other parts were useful, and they actually gained weight (meat) as they traveled.

The ancient Scots eventually developed a whole economy based on pigs.

Everybody wanted to have some pigs.

But pigs are a little bit of trouble to keep. It takes some time, space, and energy to care for pigs. Individual families eventually figured out that—although it was great to have pigs around as a source of meat and hides—they also had a lot of other things to do to take care of themselves.

So the clans decided that the most efficient thing for them to do would be to keep everybody's pigs together. They would choose one person to care for everybody's pigs. That way the families would be free to do the other things they needed to do to survive, while knowing that their pigs were being well cared for.

That was a good idea, but only if the person in charge of everybody's pigs could be trusted to take good care of swine that didn't belong to them.

Each clan needed to find someone who was responsible, honest, trustworthy, and dependable. So they would identify an exemplary member of their community and put them in charge of everybody's pigs.

That person was placed in charge of the area where the pigs were kept.

They became the "warden" of the "sty": the sty warden.

The phrase "sty warden" is where we get the words "steward" and "stewardship." So whenever we talk about "stewardship" in the context of our life together, we're essentially saying that we should all be the kind of people the whole clan could trust with their pigs.

(Interestingly, the family name of the kings and queens of Scotland from 1371 to 1603, and of England *and* Scotland from 1603 to 1714 was "Stuart." Same root word. Sty warden. That's not really relevant for this lesson, but it's cool trivia.)

So Presbyterians believe that when we are invited in 1 Peter 4:10 to "serve one another" as "good stewards of the manifold grace of God," we're essentially being

reminded and encouraged to be the kind of people the whole clan could trust with their pigs. We're being reminded that the gifts at our disposal don't belong exclusively to us. They have been given to us, by God, to share with others.

“Manifold grace of God”

Different ones of us have different gifts.

See **Romans 12:6a** (*we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us*).

When it comes to all the things we are called to do to live faithfully together in relationship with God, none of us can do all of them.

Each of us can do some of them.

“Serve one another”

Our gifts are intended to be used to serve others.

“Whatever gift you have”

This verse assumes that every reader has gifts.

Presbyterians believe that we are all gifted, that we don't all have the same gifts, and that our individual and corporate gifts are meant to be used to serve one another.

4

CAPABLE

Consider **Psalm 8:1-5**.

PSALM 8:1-5

**O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

You have set your glory above the heavens.

**Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.**

**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;**

**what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

**Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.**

The Psalmist recognizes and appreciates the fact that human beings, created in God's image according to Genesis 1, are one of the many evidences of the majesty of God. Psalm 8:5 contains the important and profound recognition that it's a good, amazing, wonderful thing to be human beings in general and a specific human in particular.

Presbyterians know about sin. We talk about sin a lot. We understand that we're not perfect as individuals or as a species. We can, and should, go on and on about the ways we fail to live the abundant life in Christ that God intends for each of us.

But, when we're at our best, Presbyterians also understand and affirm that we humans are capable of doing some amazing things. We make a lot of messes and we're much too cruel to each other. But we can also produce authentic acts of courage, compassion, sacrifice, service, and beauty.

Psalm 8:5 is right: it's good to be us. Not us Presbyterians, but us humans.

We're capable of some amazing, good, faithful, life-affirming stuff.

5

SAFE

Consider **Ephesians 2:8–10**

EPHESIANS 2:8

**For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is
not your own doing; it is the gift of God—**

“Saved” from what?

Presbyterians believe that our sin separates us from God and from each other.

We repeatedly turn away from God and fail to live the abundant life for which we were created.

The Presbyterian understanding of sin will be addressed more fully in the seventh Bible study in this series: “Nobody’s Perfect.”

We are incapable of restoring ourselves to right relationship with God. If it were left up to us, we would remain estranged from God.

But through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God comes all the way to us and saves us from separation from God and each other.

God has made us *safe* in Jesus Christ.

And . . .

EPHESIANS 2:9

not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

This is not a story about anything we do.

It's all about what God does in Jesus Christ.

EPHESIANS 2:10

For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

What God has done for us in Jesus Christ is to come all the way to us.

Because of what God does in Jesus, we are safe from the separation from God that was and is caused by our failure to live as we were created and intended to live.

Even though we screw things up, we are safe.

6

God will never abandon us—before or after we die.

Consider two verses from **Psalm 139**:

PSALM 139:7-8

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

“Sheol” refers to wherever we go when we die.

The huge and easily overlooked ramification of Psalm 139:8 is that we will never be anywhere—before or after we die—where we are beyond the reach of God's love.

This is also Paul's point in **Romans 8:38–39**.

ROMANS 8:38–39

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We're safe. And that won't change.

CONCLUSION

While we recognize and take seriously the warnings in the Bible about the consequences of our failure to live as God calls and intends us to live, Presbyterians affirm that—as a community and as individuals—we are all beloved, gifted, capable, and safe children of God.

All of us.

Already.

Right now.

Not because of anything we do.

But because of who God is.

Presbyterians are like we are because Presbyterians are Christians who believe we are beloved, gifted, capable, and safe. Already. Right now.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Do you believe you're beloved?
Gifted?
Capable?
Safe?
- Do other people in your life believe that about you?
- Are you aware of people on your campus or in your community who believe that some people are not beloved, gifted, capable, or safe children of God?
- Why do they think that?

- How can we keep from judging and dismissing them like they judge and dismiss others?
 - Or does that matter?
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