

Sermon, 18.9.23, from Isaiah 40: 21-31, preached at First Presbyterian, Concord, NC. on Sept. 23, 2018.

This morning I will begin with the words of a young man in Brooklyn.

He said these words as an eighth grader, three or so years ago. They went “viral,” and if you do not understand what that means, think of a virus, being passed from one person to the next. Going viral happens on the internet. In this case, it means that once somebody saw the young man’s words on the internet, they spread to the next person and then to the next person. This particular “virus” was indeed worth catching. Somehow these handful of words had a real effect in the part of the world in which this young man lives, a poor part of Brooklyn, and even had an effect beyond.

In some way I hope they speak to you this morning, that they even have an “effect” on you.

When asked about the one person in his life that had influenced him the **most**, here is what Vidal Chastanet said, in speaking of his middle school principal, Nadia Lopez:

“When we get in trouble, she doesn’t suspend us.

“She calls us to the office and explains to us how society was built down around us.

“And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built.

And one time she made every student stand up, and one at a time, she told each one of us, that we matter.”

I wish I had the time to do that this morning, to ask each one of you to stand, and say to you, you matter. You **really** matter. I don’t care if you are 91, I don’t care if you are five, I don’t care if you were Phi Beta Kappa, I don’t care if you dropped out of high school, you matter. I don’t care if you have made a lot of money, or if you owe more on the credit card than you have in the bank. I don’t care. **You** matter.

And if nobody has **ever** said that to you, I am sorry. Because you do. You so do.

With those words, Vidal Chastanet hit a chord among people. They were posted on a popular web site, Humans of New York, and they spread, and eventually they were used to raise well more than a million dollars for his inner-city school. The words were even heard all the way to the White House, because President Barack Obama invited Vidal and his principal, Nadia Lopez, to the Oval Office. An eighth grader from Brownsville, a poor section of Brooklyn, standing tall in the Oval Office. Dreamers of the world, take heart.

What Nadia Lopez tells her students is that each one of them matters. It is a message too often lost in our schools and in our society.

You see I think that message is biblical, 100 percent biblical. God cares about us. God knows our name, whether our name be Larry, or Heidi or Madison or Andrew or James or John. In

knowing our names, God shows respect for us, for God made us, God redeems us, God sustains us.

What did we just hear?

“Lift up your eyes and see:

Who created these?

He who brings out the host and **numbers** them

Calling them all by name, because he is great in strength

Mighty in power

Not one is missing.”

Isaiah, Chapter 40.

This passage today, to use a word familiar to eighth graders, is **awesome**. It is often read at funeral or memorial services. I read some of them, yesterday afternoon, during a memorial service. This passage has inspired great music, such as the one you often hear, be it at memorial services or wherever, hymn, known more often as “On Eagle’s Wings.”

I **never** will tire of reading passages like this. They will **never** get old. When I am down, they help to pick me up. Truth.

Have you not known, have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary

They shall walk and not faint.

(pause)

I once was naïve. In fact, I probably was naive for maybe decades. I am no longer.

I totally realize that perhaps what **you** are thinking, is yeah, I hear that on eagle’s wings thing, but my life is fairly stinky at the moment. You might be thinking to yourself, I don’t feel good, or I have been told I have something I don’t wanna have, or I hate my job, or my kid is driving me nuts, or my Mama is driving me nuts, or I am just plain exhausted, worn down, tired out. And even if my life is OK at the moment, what about the world, or our country, at large?

Wherever you look, don't you see conflict? Wherever you look, don't you see division? Look over there and you see poverty, look to Africa and you may see famine, look to eastern North Carolina and you see water everywhere, contaminated water, homes ruined, lives in disarray.

And while it in no way compares to some of those things, what about right here? First Presbyterian, Concord? That bright pastor, that intelligent pastor with the wonderful family, in the prime of his life, he left. We didn't expect that. He is gone. What happens next?

It is a hurting world, indeed, a chaotic world, a world seemingly with more questions than answers.

The temptation is to get down, or at least distressed or depressed. Come on, I read the online Washington Post every day and every day I must fight the urge just to get angry all over again.

(Pause)

As Christians, however, as believers and I hope, as followers, of Jesus, the Christ, we are called to a different place. We are called to be faithful, we are called to be hopeful, and thanks to Jesus, we are to combat every bit of this by making the word love a verb. Do love. Go and do likewise, as Jesus ended the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Are we what Presbyterian pastor Bill Carl calls "theological amnesiacs?" Do we forget who we are, and whose we are?

This prophecy was written to people in Babylonian exile. Their life was a living hell. They felt abandoned. Perhaps you do, perhaps this church does, today/

So, Bill Carl writes this:

"The real problem is that we have forgotten who we are. There is kind of a theological identity crisis in the church today. We do not know who we are as Christians anymore. We do not remember what we believe or why we believe it. No wonder we feel lost and alone. No wonder we have no idea how to talk with the world about our faith. The moment we confront trouble we collapse with anxiety and stress.... too many people are stressed out these days because of their lack of trust in God."

Our trust in God. "In God we trust," our coins say. The far bigger, and more important question, however, is this: "Do our lives say that?" Do they? Do we, truly, trust in God?

(pause)

Our lives, whether we like it or not, testify to our faith, or lack thereof.

I find it ironic when people insist "This is a Christian nation" while at the same time some of the very same people keep hammering home again and again this message: "The sky is falling."

You see, I believe God is with us. Still.

Yes. It is a mystery why bad things happen. I will never quite understand. In this life, I don't think my understanding will be ever full. I can either grow skeptical, cynical, or sour, or I can stay faithful.

I heard somebody about my age say on the radio that old guys like us can either grow cranky, or become kinder, as we age.

I don't want to be cranky. My wife Martha doesn't want me to be cranky. Neither do my children or my grandchildren or my neighbors or my coworkers or even the barista at Starbucks. Nobody likes cranky. Nobody needs cranky.

And so I get over the cranky, and instead, I wait for the Lord. I seek to be patient. I seek not to make mountains out of molehills. If the molehills do become mountains, I seek to recognize again that the Lord is still with me and with us.

I believe those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary. If I didn't believe it, I'd stay in the bed. I wouldn't get up. And I would be miserable, absolutely.

You see, I prefer that my life witness be more to faith than to fear.

I go back to that eighth grader, Vidal Chastanet.

God bless him. God bless his principal, for passing along the message that every child counts, every person counts. I hope that is the message the children receive around First Presbyterian.

Our children don't have to be "terrific", whatever that means, for us to care about them. Every one of them is already terrific. God has this humongous bumper sticker, all my kids are terrific," and God didn't have to get that sticker from the Kiwanis Club. God created our children, redeems them, sustains them; God created us, redeems us, sustains us. Our children, our youth, our parents, our senior citizens. God loves them all.

We can be ourselves. We can be who God created us to be. We **can** choose faith over fear.

Here is something else Vidal Chastanet said:

"When you live here, you don't have too many fears. You've seen pretty much everything life can throw at you. When I was 9, I saw a guy get pushed off the top of that building right there."

Still, Vidal Chastanet is making a difference. He believes he can make a difference. He believes he matters. He does matter.

And so do we, in the eyes of God. Believing that, trusting that, let us run, and not be weary, let us walk, and not faint.

Amen.

