

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
April 28, 2019  
John 20:19-31

“A Letter to Frank James Stertz on the Occasion of His Baptism”

Dear Frank,

Today is a very special day in your life. Your mom and dad, your grandparents Rollyn and Julie Coverdale (members of First Presbyterian) and XX, friends of your family, members of the session, and members of First Presbyterian Church dedicated you to God. They acknowledged that you are God’s child, they promised to guide and nurture you with love and prayer, encouraging you to follow Christ, and they heard me say, “Frank James Stertz, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever,” and everyone here promised before you and God to guide and nurture you and help you to know Christ better.

Frank, Presbyterians believe that at the heart of all our relationships is our baptism. Your baptism today is a sign and seal that God loves you, that God has called you to be in this special relationship, and that God is with you forever.

And although you didn’t understand what happened that morning, we baptized you as a baby because it’s something in which our church believes. Presbyterians baptize babies and young children because we believe that you are a part of God’s family and included in God’s family from the moment you’re born.

But this doesn’t mean you can sit back and rest comfortably, Frank. There **are** Christians who believe that all you have to do to inherit eternal life is be baptized. But we Presbyterians aren’t among them; we believe that your baptism initiates a life of service. See, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, John told him to “repent, for the kingdom of God is here.” That’s another way of saying, “Turn from your old ways and turn toward a new life of serving God and others.” Jesus’ baptism began his life of service, and he identified himself with those who were sick, homeless, poor, lonely, and seen as second class citizens. He undertook a life of service to these people and showed them that God loved them, too. In

your baptism Frank, God is calling you to reach out to others in a spirit of love, justice and mercy, as well.

Now on the Sunday we baptized you, we also celebrated and welcomed our newest class of Jubilee members. Jubilee members are people who have been members of First Presbyterian Church for 50 years. That's a really long time! In fact, that's longer than I've been alive! And I only point that because this is the first, and last time, I'll get to make that claim.

I've never served a church that has had Jubilee members, and when I first learned that First Presbyterian has Jubilee members, it told me something about the church. First, it told me that people here really love their church – because if you've been a member somewhere for 50 years, sort of like if you've been married to someone for 50 years, you really have to love the one you're with to stick around that long. But after 50 years, you also know that things are perfect; that people, or in this case a church, isn't perfect – but you've grown to accept that and love her anyways. And that is a very admirable quality in a person and not one we see very much in today's "love it or leave it" society.

Frank, since your baptism is, in many ways, your initiation ceremony into the church, and since we're honoring people who have been life-long members of the church, I thought I'd take the time today to share my thoughts on what it means to be a member of a church, and why I think it's so important. Because as you get older, I know there will be times in your life when you think you don't need the church, or wonder what the point is, and even get mad at the church. You may also experience the pain of being hurt by the church; but I urge you not to give up on the church at those times. I also know that there are many people who think it's not important to be a member of the church, or think they can go it alone, but I can assure you that when it comes to living your faith, you need a community. You need a community who holds you accountable, helps you to grow, needs you to serve, challenges you to care for others, prays with and for you, and gives structure to your Christian life.

The church, unlike other organizations you'll join, is meant to be a unique community. It's more like a family than a club, and with family come responsibilities: to care for one another, work for the good one another, and

support one another. It means getting to know others, building relationships with them, and actively caring for and encouraging them.

Of course in any family there is always some dysfunction, too. This is because the church is made up of imperfect people. We're going to get it wrong sometimes, both ministers and members. And yes, the church includes some hypocrites. But we're all hypocrites at times; no one lives picture perfect, Instagram worthy lives. But when the church is striving to be the church, she is one of the most beautiful communities in the world. One that strives to live selflessly, where all are encouraged and accepted and welcomed for who they are. And by the way, if you come across a church that doesn't accept and love you and welcome you for who you are, be wary. It's OK if they challenge you to be a better version of yourself than you are – they should do that. But they should accept you for who you are and where you are on your faith journey, too.

And if you ever question whether you need the church, I urge you to remember that you do. You need the encouragement from others, the blessings of worship, the message drawn from Scripture, and a congregation that stands together and has a greater impact on the world than one can have alone. You need a community who holds you accountable, helps you to grow, needs you to serve, challenges you to care for others, prays with and for you, and gives structure to your Christian life.

Plus, the church needs you. The Jubilee members being recognized today can probably tell you all about that, because once the church gets you're number, it never loses it! These are the people who showed up, offered a word of encouragement, taught a class, led a support group, served on the Session, Board of Deacons, and Foundation, stood at the door and welcomed people, and gave their time, talents and treasure to the church. I think it's fair to say, that through all the ups and downs of the church, maybe even their doubts, they stuck with her – and for that we can all be eternally grateful.

This leads me to the story we heard earlier about the disciple Thomas, doubting Thomas, as he's called. Thomas didn't believe Jesus was resurrected. He wanted proof; wanted to be able to put his finger in the hole that pierced Jesus' side. Now, some people give Thomas a really bad rap for this. But I don't. I find Thomas' reaction entirely believable. There is, I think, a little bit of Thomas in all

of us: the nagging voice that whispers in our ear every now and then, "maybe it isn't true," "maybe you're wrong," "maybe this is all a waste of time." When we hear that voice we doubt our faith, we doubt ourselves, and we desperately wish for proof, proof we can see, and proof we can touch.<sup>i</sup>

The truth is, however, that this "doubt" Thomas so vividly embodies is not something opposed to our faith or a sign that our faith is weak. It's not even something that years of church going and Bible reading can make disappear.

Instead, doubt is something that goes hand-in-hand with faith.

Paul Tillich, a great theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, used to say that Christians affirm their faith "in spite of:" Christians affirm that God exists *in spite of the fact* that there is still so much evil in the world. Christians affirm that God loves us *in spite of the fact* that sometimes bad things happen to good people. Christians affirm the fact that Jesus has risen *in spite of the fact* that fear and despair run rampant in the world.

The bottom line is that faith takes courage. It takes courage to affirm oneself as a person of faith when so many of our friends and family members have abandoned faith as an antiquated and irrelevant mode of being in the world. It takes courage to believe in what we cannot see, to trust in what we cannot touch, and to affirm what we cannot prove.<sup>ii</sup>

But the good news is that we don't need to summon this courage alone. God meets us where we are; and comes to us wherever we might be. Somehow, Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to Thomas-how he does it doesn't matter nearly as much as the symbolism of the act-and when he gets to Thomas he doesn't argue with him and berate him, he says simply "Put your finger here. Put your hand there." Jesus refuses to let dead bolts and locks block Thomas' faith.

So too it is with us. When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Christ will come to meet us where we are, even if it is on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe.

As this text reminds us, Jesus appeared to Thomas, even when Thomas' faith had

all but vanished in his doubt. Like Thomas, even in the midst of our disbelief and misgivings, God shows up, God is there for us, and God doesn't abandon us.

And that is what our faith is all about. It's daring to look up in hope when hope seems elusive. It's about trusting, hoping, believing, that no matter what happens, God is there. God will come with love and healing and hope into your life. God will come with light into whatever darkness you find yourself. God will come into your life, even when you can't believe that's possible.

And so I would urge you, Frank, along with everyone else here: don't let your doubts plug your faith, let them open your mind so that you're eager to learn more. Know also that as Presbyterians, our doubts make us highly skeptical of those who are too self-righteous or who claim to have all the answers. And believe me, you'll meet plenty of Christians who think they have all the answers. They will talk, talk, talk about what they know for sure. And they often use their speech to silence others.

When that happens, please speak up, and remind people that God loves everyone. As the pastor who baptized my daughter Julia said to her on the day of her baptism: "love others, not because they deserve it, but because they are children of God too. (Frank,) may people say of you and your walk with God that you are a lover of people. One who shows kindness, compassion, meekness, patience and above all else love."

Frank, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to God and God loves you no matter what. And may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon with favor and bring you peace today and every day.

Blessings,

Pastor Annie

*A sermon delivered to Frank James Stertz on the occasion of his baptism at First Presbyterian Church on April 28, 2019.*

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<sup>i</sup> [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com), Theological Themes, John 20:19-31, Kristin Johnston Lagen.

<sup>ii</sup> Kristen Lagen