

## You Are Mine

A sermon inspired by Isaiah 43:1-7

You know, I remember the first time I stood in the pulpit at my home church. It was a lessons and carols service and one of the readers hadn't shown up, so my choir director hands me a piece of paper and says, "Will you read this?" I take it and nod and he says, "Now?" and so I get up before God and creation and walk up to the pulpit and read this lesson from Isaiah. The part that most of the people from my church back home remember is that I wasn't wearing any shoes at the time, but what I remember was the sense of purpose I had when I approached the pulpit. I had a job to do and I was going to do it.

And now, I wonder what I'll remember from this moment, the last time I stand in this pulpit, in this place that has taught me so much about who I am and what it means to be a pastor. I'm much more prepared now than I was back then—I've got my shoes on and everything—but, I guess, at the end of the day, I still have a job to do and I'm going to do it. For this morning's sermon, I'd like to share an important lesson I learned during these past two years, but before I do that, would you pray with me?

God of hellos and God of goodbyes, God of learning and God of teaching, thank you for bringing us to this time and this place. Be with us here today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There were two words that I was wildly unfamiliar with when I began seminary. They weren't big, fancy theological words like hypostatic union or homoousion or obscure liturgical words like ambo and alb. They were simple, words that I think everyone knows. Words that were so easy, they made them into a children's book. Here, let me find them. Ah yes.

I. Can't.

I can't.

See, I read *The Rainbow Fish* as a kid and I loved it. A modern-day parable if ever there was one. I loved the shiny scales and I loved the colors so much so that they're still the dominant color scheme in my decorating, all blues and greens and purples. But I also took the message to heart. This book is one of those stories that I read so often and so early that it made its way into how I understand myself. I learned that the way that you make friends is by giving them things, sharing with them.

Like the Rainbow Fish, I have precious things about myself that I can give away. I can share what I've learned, I can share my time, I can share my effort, and I can share my skills. I can do plenty of things, and so "Yes, I can!" became the shiny scale that I gave to anyone who asked for it. And, like the Rainbow Fish, this giving kept me happy.

At least it did, for a good long while.

Jo Schonewolf, preached at Salem UMC, 05-05-19

You all know probably know what's coming. There came a day when I had no more scales to give. Somewhere, between going to school, going to my internship, working as a librarian, nanny, tutor, and editor, and investing in my relationships, friendships, and family, I gave away my last shiny scale. I reached back to pull out another and came back empty handed. There came a day when someone asked me for something and I said, "I can't."

It shattered me.

Because, it turns out, when you build your self-worth on what you can give to other people, the moment you don't have anything left to give, you become worthless in your own eyes, and that is a hard thing to come back from. When you think you're worthless, all sorts of unkindness will seep into your spirit. For me, to say "I can't" once made it hard for me to say "I can" again.

Now, I'm not blaming my tendency toward overcommitment and burn-out on a children's book. There were a lot of life-long factors at play and honestly, I had forgotten this book until someone gave it to the kid I nanny and I read it to him a couple of months ago. But when I read it again, I recognized something about the book that I hadn't seen before.

*The Rainbow Fish* wasn't written for me.

*The Rainbow Fish* wasn't written for the kid prone to self-giving and low self-esteem. It was written for the kid who needs to learn how to give. It's teaching a lesson I didn't need to learn.

This happens sometimes in our scriptures and our theology too. We talk so much about pride as our fundamental sin, the sin that most other sins sprout from, that we forget that many of us can't muster up any pride at all. When it's assumed that pride is our primary sin, we're told to think of ourselves less and to think less of ourselves, which is the opposite of someone who struggles with self-worth needs to hear. When you misdiagnose the sickness, you prescribe the wrong cure.

You may have experienced this too. You've shared some of your faith stories with me and I can guess that there's at least one other person in this room who has struggled or is struggling with a cure prescribed by scripture that wasn't meant for them, or at least, not meant for them at this point in their life.

But the beautiful thing about our scriptures, our theology, and our tradition, if we spend time with them, is that they *know* that not everyone struggles with the same problems all the time.

Jesus speaks comfort to the rest of the disciples but challenges Peter; he is preparing all of them for their ministries to come, but he knows who needs to be pushed and why.

And Paul, when he first hears from Jesus, receives a convicting message rather than the encouragement he receives later.

Isaiah is full of woe for the powerful who are not looking after God's people as they should but he speaks strong words of consolation to those who need it. "You are mine," God says to God's

people in our passage from Isaiah. “You are precious in my sight. I would trade the world for you. I will gather you to myself and I will love you.”

Now, you may find yourself as a disciple or Peter, as Paul before Damascus or as Paul after, as someone God is trying to convict or as someone God is trying to comfort. If you’re like me, if you’re someone struggling with “I can’t,” you’re likely in need of some comfort and a new orientation. That’s the cure for the sickness we suffer from. When you have grounded yourself in what you can do for others and suddenly find yourself unable to do what you have always done, you have to find solid ground somewhere else.

These words from Isaiah are that solid ground for me. They’re what I say to myself to remind me who I am. Be not afraid, for I have redeemed you. Be not afraid, I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight.

Knowing that I am loved by a God who unshakably loves me became my new way of understanding myself. It’s my new solid ground and that’s the lesson that I learned at seminary that I want to share with you today: **my worth does not come from what I can do for others and so I am free to do work for others.** I am wrapped up in the love of God and daily sustained by God’s grace and that is all I need. If I never did another thing for anyone else for the rest of my life, I would still rest in God’s love. I don’t need what I do to make me worthy. God’s love does that for me. I can say “I can’t” and the world will spin on.

But because I am loved by so great a love and because I am grounded in that love and grace, I can give what God has given me to others. See, the Rainbow Fish is not diminished by giving away his scales— the ocean is lit up by them. When we are freely giving out of the abundance that God has given us, it lights up the world around us. We only get to do that free, abundant giving, though, if we are resting in God’s love.

And that is my charge to you today: rest secure in God’s love and then give knowing that you are secure in God’s love. That’s all that we ever need do.

Now, you may be in a completely different place in your faith journey. This sermon may have gone completely past you because it’s not a lesson you need to hear. That’s okay. That’s good, in fact. That means that this body of believers is all growing, somehow, someday, and you don’t feel the need to be like everyone else. It is a beautiful thing if you are new to faith, even if you’ve been going to church for a while, and you’re still figuring out who God is to you and who you are to God. I hope this sermon inspires you to spend some time thinking about God’s love and what it means to you.

It is a beautiful thing if you are confirmed in your faith and feel God’s love in your life, but aren’t sure if, how, or where to share what you’ve been given with others. I hope this sermon inspires you to look at yourself and figure out what your shiny scales are and how you can give them away.

It is a beautiful thing too if you, like me, have spent your life giving your scales away. I would challenge you to think about where you find your worth, your ability to give, and to ground it somewhere unshakeable.

And it's a beautiful thing, even if it doesn't feel like it, if you have grown as a disciple in the knowledge of the love of God and have given out of your abundance and life has knocked you down anyway. You are blessed if you are poor or disadvantaged or mourning because it is God, the maker of every good thing, who will fill you up and restore you. Know that you are held in the arms of a God who loves you and that one day, you'll be able to give again. But it is not this day and that too is a good and joyful thing. Rest in God's love. That's all you need to do.

In a few months, I will pack up everything I own and move to Cullowhee, North Carolina. It's so far west, it's practically Tennessee. But it's where God, or, at least, a bishop who's supposed to be listening to God, has sent me to be a pastor. A couple of months ago, maybe even a month ago, that would have scared the life out of me, despite having learned so much from my time here about leading worship and planning small groups and managing church finances and just existing with church people. No matter how prepared for ministry I was, I was struggling to care of myself, much less take on Jesus's commission to tend his sheep. I didn't have anything to give.

Now, though, I feel like I can handle it. I need some rest, for sure (seminary, like I've said before, is a marathon that you run at a sprint pace and I'm tired), but I feel stable now. I feel peaceful. And that's not just because the papers are in and the work of seminary is done. It's because I know that I don't *have* to do the work, I *get* to do the work. It's the lesson of a lifetime and I'm so grateful to you all for supporting me while I learned it.

So, after two good long years here at Salem, as I leave this pulpit, if I leave you with any message at all, let it be this: Wherever you are, whatever life has given to you or taken from you, rest in God's love. Know that God loves you deeply and calls you as God's own. Let that knowledge fill you up and, when you're ready, give in love to everyone around you. Let's light up the ocean around us with all that God has given us.

Amen? Amen.