

## **“THE GIFT OF BELONGING”**

Romans 6:1-11; I Corinthians 12:12-13  
September 25, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

Everyone loves a baptism! Not because Martin Luther understood it as an important truth in the life of the Christian. When he faced challenges, he'd remember that he'd been baptized, and this would be enough to see him through. We are not thinking of challenging days ahead at a baptism.

Everyone loves a baptism, but not for its profound theological imagery of dying and rising with Christ. We may enjoy conversation that delves into its deep meaning for our faith. We're not engaging in the debates about the best way to do a baptism: sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. We're not trying to justify the baptizing of infants to those who only recognize the baptism of adults. Such conversation may be instructive, may even nurture faith, but it's not what is usually on our minds.

When we are present at a baptism, “thinking” is probably not the right word to describe what's happening to us on the inside. Whether it's an infant or an adult, we are feeling something, not thinking about something. Baptisms move us to joy, to a sense of peace and love.

You may recall from Janet's sermon about sacraments that both Baptism and Communion touch the whole person. They are not so much about teaching us a better understanding of the faith as they are about nurturing our connection to faith. They are experiences, not dogmas. They are about relationships, not orthodoxy. Like Communion, only more so, Baptism instills in us a sense of belonging.

We love baptisms, because in them, the love of God feels so real; because we feel the circle of our faith community growing larger and younger; because the love within the community of faith is on display; because it makes visible, makes physical the community of belonging. We love baptisms because the desire to belong is fundamental to being human. There are few gifts more precious than the gift of belonging.

Of course it is possible to trivialize baptism. Because most baptisms in our tradition are of infants, we can reduce the sacrament to a sentimental regard for babies, all of whom are adorable. We can wonder more about whether he'll cry after the water wakes him from a sound sleep rather than the commitment we make to her as she grows up in the faith. It can be less about belonging and more about the moment. I understand where Shawnthea Monroe is coming from when she writes: “In the mainline liberal tradition, baptism has become a somewhat toothless sacrament, a life event not unlike graduation or prom. Baptism is a gift we give to our children, but not the focus of our attention or a wellspring of theological meaning making” (p. 160). What's the point, she seems to be saying, if the love of God for the infant ends with the font? “Belonging” that doesn't carry into the future really isn't worth much.

Well, I don't consider graduations and proms "toothless events," but let's think a moment about how much more baptism can be to the life of faith. I'm going to talk about baptism as the gift of belonging that ushers us into three communities, which in the end are the same community.

First, in baptism, we declare that we belong to the community of the dying. "Do you not know," Paul writes, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death." This first community is not the community we think of as we witness the baptism of an infant. It may be many years before we introduce this community to the child who continues to grow in faith. But if we fail to welcome them into the community of the dying, we nurture a faith that cannot survive in the world as we know it today. We plant a seed on rocky soil that is blown away with the wind.

H. Richard Niebuhr once caricatured preachers of the Progressive era as teaching that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross" (Smith, p.160). Christians today are not so keen to hear about the cross either. Many Protestant churches no longer even offer a Good Friday service, moving from Maundy Thursday straight to Easter. But there is no resurrection without death. It is Jesus' death that makes him so fully human, the death that declares so loudly the love of God for creation, the death that gives authenticity to Jesus' invitation to join him in the community of the faithful.

In the prayer at a memorial service, we thank God that his or her "baptism is now complete in death." Jesus' death does not remove the reality of death from our lives; it gives us a companion with whom we can face death. Being baptized into Christ's death means that we are not alone when we face difficult challenges. When disease, or hate, or envy or the forces of evil would reduce life, we find strength and consolation not just in the one who has experienced the worst that life can bring, but in the community that has gathered around him. It is Jesus, the one willing to die, who calls us into the community that struggles against the forces of death, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, comforts the dying, stands with the oppressed. Baptism welcomes us into this kind of community: one in solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the downtrodden, the dying and the grieving. When Martin Luther would face a heavy burden, the first thing he would do is remind himself: "I am baptized." Remembering our baptism gives us courage and strength to face the low points in life.

Belonging to the community of the dying not only helps us face the forces that tear away at our lives, but it also helps us to face the evils within. Being baptized into Christ's death urges us to let go of the habits and the qualities that diminish life. J. Vanhoozen, commenting on this passage, wrote that "we have to 'practice' our baptism each day, dying to our old selves and living in the promise of new life" (Freeman, p. 350). Baptism reminds us that we are not alone in the struggle against those forces within and without that diminish the life to which Christ calls us.

The flip side of belonging to the community of the dying is that we also belong to the community of the living. We are welcome into the community that blesses life and the

world. "If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his," writes Paul. The followers of Jesus are basically an Easter community. The church, very early on, chose to worship on the day of Jesus' resurrection because their future was defined in terms of the new life. Baptism doesn't end in the community of the poor and oppressed. It starts there because faith does not separate us from the real world, where suffering and death occur; but we are welcomed into the community chooses to move beyond death. "I am baptized" is not just an acknowledgement of our need before God, but a commitment to life. It does not remove us from the realities of this life. It doesn't make us perfect. But it does turn us into the direction of new life. It begins the healing process

James Freeman wrote: "The church needs to remind itself continually of the potency of God's activity in its midst, to embrace the imagery of water and font... to give thanks for the foundation of God's word and to point toward the coming fullness of God's reign" (p.350). This is why the church not only prays for healing, but celebrates the technologies and the people who bring healing to the world. This why the church needs to be an active participant in movements of liberation. It's why the church not only feeds the hungry and visits those in prison, but advocates for reforms that change the structures that create hunger where there is food aplenty and challenge the prison system to move beyond punishment. As those who have experienced the grace of God, we belong to the community that redeems the lost, that bears witness to the goodness of creation, and that welcomes all to join us as we move toward life as God intended.

Again, James Freeman tells us: "The fluid property of water should remind us of God's grace that flows in and through life. The physical weight and substance of water should point to the very real presence of God. The splashing and gurgling of water can take on a vocal quality remind us of voices: prophet, psalmist, the great cloud of witnesses that urges us on in our faithful living, The sight of water as it is poured should evoke the pouring down of God's righteousness" (p. 348).

In baptism, we belong to the community of the dying and the living. For most of us in the church today, baptism is usually the baptism of an infant. Bobbie Gerber sent me an email last week in which she said: "It's an awfully big thing to do to such a tiny person." As I've talked about baptism this morning, I hope you can see that it is "an awfully big thing," but let me mention one more community that I think will help us understand why we do this "big thing" for "tiny persons."

We welcome the baptized into the community of Christ's body, the church. The community of the dying and the living is really a way to describe the church's vocation. These communities remind us of the world in which we live and the world to which we aspire. The remembrance of our baptism holds us to this path that moves from death to new life. We know from experience that this is not easy, that were it not for the community we could not possibly hope to stay on course.

When we began this journey into faith, many have said, whether we were just weeks old or 80 years, we were in fact just infants, ill-equipped to respond to the forces of death or

imagine the possibilities for life. We in fact have nothing to stand on but the grace and love of God. But this is what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means: that the love of God is enough. In baptism, we are welcomed into his body, the church.

Raewynne Whiteley puts it this way: “We come to the water of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. We come out of that water changed. Our identity is no longer solitary; we can no longer truly be known without reference to that community into which we have been incorporated: the body of Christ, the church. After baptism, we are more than just ourselves; we are by definition beings-in-relationship. When the spirit of God once moved over the face of the deep and brought life to the world, the Spirit of God remains the source of the life, the breath of the church, moving among us and within us” (pp. 279, 281).

Whether “Jew or Greek, slave or free,” short or tall, young or old, baptism offers the gift of belonging. We are not alone. We are loved by God. In baptism, we are given a home, a community through which we will let go of death and reach forward to life. The church is by no means perfect in the execution of its vocation, but in baptism we are reminded of this purpose and sometimes called back to the task of nurturing faith, of calling the world from death to life. In baptism, we bind ourselves again to one another, recalling the grace and love of God, and recommit ourselves to the hope that is life and love and peace. In baptism, we come back home to welcome and nurture another into the journey of faith. In baptism, we celebrate the truth that we belong to God and are reminded that we also belong to one another as we move death to life. We are not, nor have we ever been alone. This is what we celebrate and why everyone loves a baptism. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Resources:

James Freeman, Shawnthea Monroe, Raewynne Whiteley, and Smith in various volumes of *Feasting on the Word*.