

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“The Water’s Fine”

Genesis 1:1-5 (NRSV)

[1:1] In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, [2] the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. [3] Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. [4] And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. [5] God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

[9] In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. [10] And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

DISAGREEMENT

In the Presbyterian Church (like many other churches) we have two sacraments, the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. The precedent for the Lord’s Supper is clearly spelled out in Scripture in several places. We’re all quite familiar with the words of institution. “This is my body that was broken for you. This was my blood that was shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

But, when it comes to baptism the scriptural mandate is not so clear. True Jesus did tell his disciples in the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” But, aside from this formula there is no particular passage that spells out the way baptism should be done or exactly what it means.

So, it comes as no surprise that there is a great deal of disagreement when it comes to the second sacrament. Different baptismal practices have developed in the church that represents a particular theological point of view. For example, if we believe that baptism represents the washing away of sin, then baptism by immersion is a good symbol of that change. You literally take a bath in grace and wash away the old life.

If you want to put an emphasis upon the fact that baptism signals the coming of the Spirit, your mode of baptism might be sprinkling or pouring to symbolize the descent of the heavenly dove into a person's life.

In the Presbyterian Church we believe that baptism can take on both these meanings and would approve of a pastor using pouring, sprinkling or baptism by immersion. (Though if we do the latter we will have to rent space from the local Baptist Church or go down the river one warm day.)

JOHN'S BAPTISM

Certainly going down by the river would seem to replicate John the Baptist's mode of baptism. In preparation for the coming of the Messiah he told the people that they needed to repent. John said that they were dirty with their sinful ways. They needed to take a bath and wash away their sin. And they did. Doves people came to repent and be baptized in the Jordan River.

They expected the Messiah to come at any moment, and they wanted to be ready. Many people look at baptism this way even today.

But, I would suggest (and I think John himself suggests in our passage for today) that this is not the only way or even the best way to understand baptism. Baptism is a sign of personal repentance. But, it is about more than just dedicating ourselves to trying harder.

Water Baptism has been and always will be preparation for a greater calling. It prepares our hearts and minds for another more powerful baptism, something John called the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

John told the people what they needed to do to get ready. They needed to change their ways and be alert. But, John's baptism would not save anyone. Salvation was coming from the one that was greater than John. In fact John didn't think that he was worthy to untie the shoes of this great Savior who was coming.

THE MODEL BAPTISM

So, though we can learn a great deal from John's baptism, I contend that his baptism should not be the final model for ours. If John said that the one who comes after him (that is Jesus) is more important, then it stands to reason that the baptism of Jesus is the more important story that we hear today. In fact if we pay careful attention our lesson for today can effectively teach us what the sacrament means.

Some might object that Jesus' baptism was unique. Jesus was sinless. We're not. Jesus was the Son of God. We're not. True enough.

And yet there is a connection. Jesus was God's Son, and as disciples of Jesus we are God's children as well. We are adopted into the heavenly family. Baptism is the sign of this. Baptism means being adopted into the family of faith. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Galatians,

[26] You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, [27] for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
Galatians 3:26-27 (NIV)

When we are baptized our family suddenly gets a lot bigger, and a voice from heaven proclaims to us, “You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you. I am pleased with you.”

God made that statement about Jesus after his baptism. “You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.”

THE POWER OF LOVE

Have you ever made a statement like this?

I have. For many of us that little expression of Fatherly love triggers tender memories. I’ve made this statement like this twice in my life. I was in the hospital looking down at these helpless little babies ... a little girl and a little boy. I said, “You are my daughter, you are my son, and that changed everything.”

The birth of a child is such a common occurrence. And yet many who work in labor and delivery in the hospital have often talked to me with wide eyed innocence about the wonder of it all.

In a way I think birth connects us with creation. The heavens are rolled back, and the Spirit of the Creator pays a visit to our little lives. There is something sacred about a new birth.

New birth changes us. When you look down at that little newborn baby you recognize it’s not just about me and what I want anymore. It’s about the family. This is truly a common miracle. In nine short months God changes our world in ways that we could scarcely imagine.

New birth also reminds us that we are not in control ... of anything. When we say, “You are my son or you are my daughter” that’s just the beginning.

There will be trips to the doctor or even the hospital after minor and sometimes major accidents. There will be struggles and setbacks. When this child gets older (this usually occurs around age 13) they might just decide that you absolutely devoid of any knowledge whatsoever and they will do the absolute opposite of what you think is best.

But, no matter what they say or do you can never get away from that statement you made when the child was born, “You are my daughter. You are my son. I love you. I am pleased with you.” That relationship has a claim on you that will last all your life and even beyond your life.

The Bible consistently tells us that our relationship with God is like that of a child to a loving parent. And when we are adopted into the family of faith it is like new birth. It is like (as Jesus told Nicodemus) being “born again” or being “born from above.” The waters of baptism symbolize the waters of new birth.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

When a child is born into the family of faith we believe that God has already said, “You are my son. You are my daughter. I love you.”

Now of course the child doesn’t know this just as my children didn’t know that I loved them when they were born. It was up to me to make those statements a reality. Love has to be lived before it becomes more than just an ideal.

And in the same way when we baptize a child, we are taking on a solemn responsibility to be “godparents” to that child. We are saying that it is up to us to make sure that this child at an appropriate age of confirmation will claim this faith for himself. He will understand that he is loved not only by his family and friends but by a God who knew him and made plans for his life before he was even born.

Parents often fail in the raising of their children. We are human, and sometimes the love we profess is not expressed in the way we live. In the same way congregations often fail to pass on the faith to their sons and daughters. This has been true from the very beginning.

The Hebrew Scriptures document this pattern. It is the same story over and over again. God’s people forget who they are and fail to pass on the faith to their children. The people ignore and forget the commandments of God. This results in apostasy, exile, and self destruction.

And then through the grace of God and the work of his prophet faith is restored.

STRONG FEELINGS ON BAPTISM

When we discussed baptism in our Bible studies this past week, there were strong feelings on the subject. Some believed that baptism should only be done when a person understands what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Others who had been baptized as infants asked, “Are you saying that my baptism is not valid?” Some who were baptized as infants were grateful that their parents took this step and for them discipleship was just as natural as growing up.

Others countered that they were baptized as an infant, grew up in the church and went through confirmation. But, they really didn’t understand what it meant to have faith until much later in their life when they were baptized again and joined another church that took faith more seriously.

Another member pointed out that though she grew up in a church that practiced believer’s baptism, but that it was no guarantee of faith. As a teenager she joined the church not out of faith but because that’s what her friends were doing.

I think our group was fairly typical. When it comes to baptism we often don’t practice what we preach. It doesn’t really matter if we practice believer’s baptism only or (as we do in the

Presbyterian Church) if we practice infant baptism and believer's baptism; we often fail to teach the faith adequately.

We baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but we fail to make disciples.

STEADFAST LOVE

But, though we fail, the Bible teaches us that the promises of God do not fail. The love of God for his people is stronger than our weakness. As the Bible puts it, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." God's love truly is a love that will not let us go.

And the promise of that steadfast love is what sustains us when things go terribly wrong.

That's why we don't re-baptize anyone in the Presbyterian Church. Baptism is not about us and what we do. Baptism is about God and what God promises.

We, like the prodigal son might go to the far country and stray from the faith. But, God is the loving Father, always waiting for us to come home. Baptism reminds us that even when we were in the far country God was with us and for us.

When we are baptized the skies might not roll back like a scroll, the Holy Spirit might not come down upon us in the form of a dove, and we may not hear a voice from heaven. But, according to this passage we are all children of that same promise. God tells us, "You are my child. I love you."

That is a rock that can keep us above water when the storm winds blow. When everyone else is putting us down we can proudly sing, "I'm a child of the king" and know that it is true.

COSTLY BAPTISM

In his autobiographical book, *Creative Dislocation*, Robert McAfee Brown remembered the day in 1960 when he participated in a Lutheran worship service in East Berlin only a short time before the Berlin wall was constructed. There were not many people present that day. Church attendance was viewed with suspicion by the state.

In fact the East German Republic had developed secular alternatives to replace all the rituals of the church. But, despite this, a young couple was there in the service, presenting their child for baptism.

Brown was quite frankly amazed. Why, he wondered, would this couple jeopardize their future and that of their child by insisting on this ancient ritual of baptism? A secular alternative was readily and painlessly available.

Brown wrote,

"The couple did not have to answer my question. Their very act of bringing their baby to the church is a public statement of their priorities. They engage in significant risk because of their faith. In the face of their quiet, public courage I feel unworthy."

This couple believed that their child was also a child of the king. Their child was God's child first. And as Paul put, nothing in all creation "neither death, nor life, nor things present or things to come" can change that story.

Whenever Martin Luther found himself ready to give up, whenever worry for his own life and the life of the Church he loved overwhelmed him, it is said that he would touch his forehead and say to himself: "Remember Martin, you have been baptized."

I would suggest that this is a very good reminder. Baptism reminds us that we were born in a state of grace, and grace will lead us home.

We all have those days when everyone is "losing their heads and blaming it on us." All those accusations have a way of taking a toll on us. The world is telling us, "You're a nobody." And sometimes we live down to their expectations

In a world that often seeks to put us down we are called to remember the baptism of our Lord. Instead of judging sinners he identified with them in his baptism. In fact he took sin upon himself. Instead of putting people down he lifted them up. The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended upon our world.

We do not believe what the world tells us, that we are nobody special. We are somebody, not because we have done great things or because we are always right. We are somebody because God has called us.

Remember your baptism. Remember that you are somebody because God says that you are somebody.

Let us respond to God's promise with a life of faith, forgiveness and gratitude for a love that will not let us go.

And let us diligently teach our children that wonderful truth.

"You are God's child. God loves you and God is pleased with you. He will never leave you."

Amen.