

Baptism
October 8, 2006

Today we draw to a close our brief preaching series on the sacraments. Last weekend was communion; today we reflect together on baptism. I invite you to turn in your sermon outlines or your Bibles to follow along with me as I share the word for today from the Word of God; reading first from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 18-20; and then from Romans chapter 6, verses 1-4.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the ends of the age.’”

And now reading from Romans, chapter 6, this is what Paul wrote to that young, fragile church: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we have been buried with Him by baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life.”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, open our eyes to the wisdom of Your word and the depth of Your love. Today inspire us to claim for ourselves the promise explicit in our baptism. In Christ, Amen.

I have absolutely no recollection of my own baptism. All I have seen are the pictures. In fact, I should have brought one to show you. My favorite shows my parents standing with me, holding me. I am wearing a little white astronaut's outfit, I think (They called it a baptism jumpsuit, or something!). My father is holding me in his arms. My mother is standing beside him, and they have this rather strange look on their faces; somewhat pained. Looking at the picture, you may wonder about their expressions until your gaze slides down to my face, and you find that my mouth is wide, emitting what was obviously an ear-piercing scream. You can just see it in the pictures! I have no recollection of that day, but one of my earliest memories is the time I went swimming with my family at a beautiful lake in Wisconsin. My parents were great friends with Betty and Bob Ubbelhotte, who came along with us to the lake. We were swimming and having fun, and my mother entrusted my care to my father. (It's always dangerous, as mothers know, to entrust the care of their children to their husbands, but my mother did so.) I was fiercely independent and struck out for the water. This is one of my earliest recollections, so I don't know exactly how old I was, but I do know I was very young, and did not yet know how to swim. The experience was so traumatic that I remember it vividly. I ventured out as deep as I dared go, and the water was about at my chin. I felt the sand beneath my feet begin to slip away, and I started to bounce trying to breathe. Fear so gripped my heart, that it constricted my throat; it felt as though it shrank to about the size of a small straw,

and I could not even yell out for help. In that moment, I was so afraid, but then I felt my father's arms. He had come behind me and swept me up with one strong, powerful motion. He pressed me close to his chest and walked me back to the shallow water, and I can still remember the feel of his wet, warm chest and the strength of his arm around me, and I was held tightly within my father's love.

If you can imagine that moment, then you can begin to understand the significance of baptism. Whether you can recall yours or not, the experience we are promised in scripture is to be enfolded in God's love and empowered to live life confidently in him. Consider the scripture, beginning with that great passage from Romans. I studied Romans with Leander Keck, who wrote the foremost commentary on the Book of Romans. This passage from the 6th chapter was one of his favorites. We spent *hours* delving through just these verses. Paul raises the rhetorical question, "Ought we then to keep on sinning that grace may abound?" And he answers his own question, saying, "By no means! For in baptism," Paul says, "with Christ we have died to our sinful nature. We have confronted death and with Christ we are raised from death to life."

You know the fear; you have been touched by the apprehension. It probably wasn't at a lake in northern Wisconsin; maybe it was while you stood beside the bedside of someone you loved and knew they were dying. Perhaps it was your child who was so deathly ill, you feared for their life. Maybe it was a relationship that was dear and precious to you and you felt it crumbling. You have felt the fear; God intends that you experience the love, and that is precisely what Jesus offered. His last words to the disciples, as He was preparing to ascend into heaven were, "Go." (Don't stay where you are.) "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit . . ." For there is extraordinary power revealed in God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Sustainer, God the Father, Christ the Savior, and the Holy Spirit, who is with us always.

Then Jesus said something awesome - almost unfathomable to the human mind - "I am with you always, even to the ends of the age." Do you understand? When we are forced to moments of extremeness, when we are confronted with the fears and apprehensions of living life triumphantly in Christ, the promise is that God is with us always. Martin Luther, when faced and plagued with the greatest challenges to his faith, feeling called to repent, would place his own hand on his head and say, "Martin, remember. You are baptized." Remember your baptism and understand the significance. Let me walk you through the significance. These are the truths of scripture, that when we are baptized into Christ, God is revealed. The sacrament literally means "the revelation of God". Something mundane is transformed into the magnificent. Our eyes are opened, and we look beyond the ordinary and see the extraordinary.

When I served the church in Monroe, Wisconsin, I did a good amount of flying. I flew with the Civil Air Patrol, and I was working on my instrument rating. I still recall vividly flying in heavy clouds on an instrument approach into the Janesville Airport, flying the ILS needles. Really, the key in terms of the instrument approach is to line up the needles and hold them steady throughout the entire descent. As I was flying, looking just at the

instrument panel, I broke out of the clouds, lifted my eyes, and there was the runway right in front of me. You can only begin to imagine how good that feels! It's like that in life, also. There are times it feels as if we're in the clouds, the haze, the smog, and all the other "muck" of life, and we cannot see much beyond it - it's as if there is muddy water all around us. Then there are those moments when everything clears up, and God's presence is so obvious and true.

As you were driving to church this morning, did you see the sunrise? (Probably not, for when I was driving, you might have still been sleeping!) Those of you who did see the sunrise this morning know that it was gorgeous; filled with phenomenal colors! As I drive to church for worship, it is my practice to always be listening to praise music, as it puts me in the spirit to truly worship God. So this morning, I was listening to, "How Great Is Our God", by Chris Tomlin, while driving across the bridge on O'Brien over 50 Highway, and the sky was magnificent! I thought to myself, "Yes, God breaks through on my mundane world and reveals the magnificent." This is just water (picking up the baptismal font), but it reveals God. The truth about baptism is that it is a sacrament, and God is revealed in it.

Secondly, baptism is for believers and those who will be. We lovingly, respectfully disagree with our Baptist brothers and sisters who contend that only baptism for adults or those who are believers is appropriate. The biblical justification for our United Methodist position is Acts, chapter 16. Go and read the story; it's magnificent! Paul and Silas were in prison. (I love a good prison break, don't you?) Anyway, they were in prison and there was an earthquake, which caused their shackles to fall off and the jail to crack open. The jailer, a good Roman soldier, realized that he had failed in his duty to keep Paul and Silas (who were considered so dangerous they must be chained) bound. He had failed in his responsibility and was ready to fall on his own sword. (Wouldn't that make a great movie?) Then, he ventured into the depths of the prison and found Paul and Silas sitting, singing. He was so struck by their faith, confidence, and assurance of life even in the face of death, that he wanted what they had. So, he fed them, washed them, clothed them, and said to them, "What do I need to do to be saved?" Paul invited him to claim Christ and be baptized. The scripture tells us (you can turn to the passage, if you'd like - Acts, chapter 16.), "At that same hour of the night, he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay."

What does that mean? It means that from the beginning of our faith, Paul was practicing baptism of families - even those infants held in our arms. That's why in the United Methodist Church, baptism is a parental prerogative. You may have your infant baptized, or you may wait until they are older, because we believe in the prevenient grace of God. What does that mean? It means that God loves us so extravagantly that we cannot begin to understand it. That's why we know that if a babe dies before being baptized, s/he goes directly to God, for that is the grace that is ours in Jesus Christ. Further, when I do a funeral service for a person who is disabled intellectually, or mentally challenged, I can commiserate and mourn with the parents and assure them that their child has gone to be with God and has been made holy - that is the grace of our faith. Baptism is for believers and those who will be.

Baptism is, secondly, an outward and visible sign of an inward grace. Some of you are married, aren't you? (When I ask that question, you really should respond with a little more enthusiasm, I think! You should say, "Yes; most definitely!") Now think this through with me. There existed a love before you were married, right? In fact, it was the love, which is a gift from God, that knit your two hearts together and made them one, and led you to the point of commitment in Christ. Perhaps you stood before a pastor somewhere, at some time, and professed your undying love to one another, "'til death do us part." Wasn't that the commitment? You made outward and visible what was an inward experience of love and grace. It's no different with God; the scripture tells us, the promise is explicit. God conceived of us before our parents did, He knit us together in our mothers' wombs, and He brought us to life and to the point of awareness of His love. That is His gift of grace. Now there are some denominations who believe that if a baby dies before being baptized, s/he is not going to heaven. We find absolutely no scriptural foundation for that belief. What *we* believe is that baptism is an outward and visible sign of a relationship that already exists. God loved you even before you were aware.

The next truth is that baptism is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves. I am deeply troubled by the perception in the world of the Christian church - that we are arrogant and self-righteous. What I find most deeply troubling is that sometimes it's true. Christians all too often bring a rather judgmental attitude toward others. Truth be told, this is the direct opposite of Christ's invitation. . . I watch the news and see how churches are portrayed, and it breaks my heart, for it is so far from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who said, "**Who, then, can enter into the kingdom of heaven? No one save but for the grace of God.**" If left to our own devices, we are separated from the divine. The only one who bridges the gap and draws us close to God's heart is Christ. The best metaphor I've found to describe the relationship we have with God is that we are beggars who have found the feast; we were hungry, and we found the place where we can be fed. Does that in any way elevate our status before the Almighty? No. It simply underscores the truth that without Christ we are lost, and in Christ we find extraordinary hope and love. It is our privilege to share it and live in such a way that it is obvious that Christ reigns in our hearts.

That brings me to the next truth I want to share with you - baptism is a public profession. I love the Royals. (How's that for a public profession?) I know, right now it's easy to be down on the Royals, isn't it? God bless their hearts. You know, this is the first time in my life I have lived close to a major league baseball team. I used to have to drive quite a distance to watch the Milwaukee Brewers play and believe me, most of the time it wasn't worth the drive. Once in awhile, I'd go see the Cubbies play down in Chicago, but that was often a heartbreaking experience. And now, here we are living in the great city of Lee's Summit, with the stadium so close, and I love to go to Royals games. I love the Royals, and eventually they're going to win, Amen? (We'll pray for that, won't we?) Sitting in the stands, the family atmosphere that's created is wonderful.

One of the things I always love at every game is when they do the Kiss Cam. Remember the Kiss Cam? My wife and I have yet to be on the Kiss Cam, but I'm waiting for the

day! Some of our members have, and it just thrills me to see it. Dwight Jones and his wife, Marilou, were on the Kiss Cam just recently. (If you know Dwight and Marilou, give them a hard time about that, will you please? It was, as I understand, adorable.) The last time MaryAnn and I were at the stadium, we were sitting watching and the Kiss Cam came on. As they panned around to all these different couples, of all different ages, they came to this one couple, sitting rather close to each other. As the camera zoomed in, the couple looked up at the JumboTron, and realizing they were on, the guy leaned over to kiss the young woman, but she turned away! (Interrupted by disappointed moans.) That was my reaction, too - I actually booed with everybody else! I mean, here they are sitting tight, but she didn't want to kiss him on screen. That's the way it is with some Christians, isn't it? We want to keep our faith exclusively private; we don't want anyone to know. But it doesn't work that way. In fact, Jesus was pretty explicit about it. He said, if you deny me, I'll deny you. It's that simple. **"If you acknowledge me as your Lord, you will be my beloved child."** That's what he said; it's in the Bible. It's an invitation to step up and be public in our faith.

We really need to be equipping our children. You don't see it as much here at the 8:15, service, but if you came to visit the 9:30 service, you'd see the front rows filled with students – teenagers - who need our prayers. It is so difficult to be a young person today. They face temptations we didn't dream about when we were young people, and they do it continually. They live in a culture that is rather intolerant of people of faith at the high schools and middle schools. Those who are active in the youth program and are public in their faith are called Super Christians (and other more demeaning, denegrating names). That is why the youth ministry at this church is so important. Look around you - they are the next generation; the ones who will be entrusted with proclaiming the Good News of Christ to future generations. That is why we are so intentional about youth ministry and Scouting, because believe me, the task today is to shape young hearts and lives so that they are ready to make a public profession of Christ and live as His beloved.

Finally, baptism is a community celebration. I love baptisms, don't you? We've got baptisms at 9:30 and 11:00 today. I wish I could have found a baptism for you this morning; I really do. I looked, but nobody really wanted to get up early enough to be baptized this morning at the 8:15 service! A few of you suggested re-baptism, but we don't do that, by the way. But, as I said, baptism is a celebration. Robert Schnase, who is our Bishop in Missouri, served a church down in Texas before moving here. He was recently reminiscing and describing a baptism he did one Sunday, in which there were two families. One was a large extended family, whose newest addition was being baptized. The other was a couple who had just moved to the area. They were alone on the platform with their little child. The babies were baptized together in the ceremony at church.

The grandfather of the extended family, there with all of his flock, was so proud. Then there was this small family - just a husband and wife and their little child, and they looked rather alone. Bishop Schnase described that, at the end of the service, both families kind of melded together, visiting, talking, and laughing. By some hook or crook, one of the parents of the isolated family asked the grandfather of the large family to hold

their baby. As he stood there, holding a child that was not his own, people came up and started taking his picture. He tried to stop them and explain to them, “No, no, this isn’t my grandchild!” But finally, he was quiet and let it happen. He just held that baby, because something had happened within him – it was written all over his face - a true “God moment” had transpired. The baptisms had become a true sacrament, in which God was revealed.

The next day, that gentleman came to see his pastor, Robert Schnase. He sat down and said, “Pastor, I gotta have a word with you. I’ve taken care of my children and, through them, my grandchildren. I’ve made provisions in my will and they will be well cared for - that’s a priority. And until yesterday, I thought it was my only priority. Then I held that babe in my arms. . .” And he said, “Pastor, it all of a sudden dawned on me - that baby is a responsibility of mine also - and not just *that* baby, but all the babies we baptize who become part of our children and youth ministries.” He went on, “I want you to know that I’ve made an appointment with my attorney. I’m going to revise my will, because it’s not enough that I just take care of my own grandchildren; I need to be taking care of my extended family - the church.”

What an awesome moment of understanding! It’s so easy to fall into the trap of caring for ourselves, for our own. *The church is the only institution in the world that exists for those who are not yet its members.* We have a responsibility for the children who are here, and for the children who have yet to come. That is why there are no private baptisms in our church, because whenever we baptize a baby or an adult, it is a community celebration.

So what does all that mean for you? Some of you don’t remember your baptisms. Others of you remember vividly the moment when you were immersed or sprinkled. Some of you wonder if it’s even relevant, whether you remember or not. Here’s the truth. God loves you even when you are unlovable. God loves you and, even when you feel most alone in the world - confronted by challenges, sorrow, suffering, and even death - the promise of the scripture is that God is always with you, for Christ has promised to be there even to the ends of the age. We as a church are trying to do something radical - to be a genuine community of faith. It’s not easy, but we are striving to be something authentic to Christ - a community of faith that envelops one another in love, and expresses it in very tangible ways. Then, when you find yourselves in those times of fear, despair, or desperation, you will feel the loving arms of God around you, holding you tightly, strongly within His love. In those moments, you will remember, “Yes, I am baptized; I am a beloved child of God.” Amen?

Pray with me, please. Loving gracious God, we remember our baptisms with gratitude. We know that baptism is but an outward and visible sign of the inward grace of Your love, the promise of Your presence, and the assurance of Your forgiveness. Lord, allow that experience of life - that holy sacrament - to change our lives forever. In Christ, Amen.

Some of you may not yet be baptized. If you are at the point where you are ready to make that step in faith - to commit your hearts and lives to Christ - I am eager to be in

conversation with you. As your pastor, I would be privileged to proclaim a public celebration of your baptism.