

SERMON: What Really Matters in Baptism?

January 10, 2010

PRAYER: Lord God, you sent your Beloved Son Jesus to be baptized among sinners, to seek and to save the lost. By the power of your Spirit speak to us through your Word read and proclaimed, that we may honor the identity you lavish upon us in baptism, as your own beloved children through faith. This we ask in the name of him whose baptism we share, Christ our Lord. Amen.

OT LESSON: Isaiah 43:1-7

NT LESSON: Luke 3:15-22

On Christmas morning we drove to Bowling Green, KY, to be with our son Michael and his family for a few days. While we were there on Sunday morning, Susan and I and our granddaughter Emily went to The Presbyterian Church. Michael and Teresa were teaching SS at the Methodist Church they attend, and their younger daughter Ellie went with them. As we were waiting for the service to begin, I asked Emily if she remembered her sister's baptism there at the church five years ago. She grinned and nodded her head. Yes, she remembered it well, as do all of us in the family.

The pastor of the Church, Matthew Covington, and their associate pastor did most of the baptismal service, but I did the baptism itself and the part just before it where I say to the child those lovely words from the French Reformed Service:

"For you, little child, Jesus Christ came into the world; he suffered and did battle; for you he went through the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary, for you he cried, 'It is fulfilled!' for you he was triumphant over death; for YOU, and you, little child, do not yet know any of all this. Thus is confirmed the word of the Apostle, 'We love because God first loved us.'"

The minute I began speaking to her, Ellie broke out in a big grin, almost as if she did know what I was saying. She never stopped smiling the whole time I was talking to her. Michael and Teresa were afraid that she might be a bit fussy that time of the morning, but she was perfect. What else would you expect?

The night before I had talked to Emily about what we were going to do at Ellie's baptism. I reminded her of her own baptism two years ago also on the Sunday after Christmas. What I failed to do was remind her about the **water** in baptism. I've told you the story before, but it's worth repeating. When I reached to take Ellie in my arms to baptize her, Emily turned to her father and said, "He's taking Sister away. Where's he going with her?" When I put the water on her head, Emily really got upset. She turned to the congregation and said, "He got her wet! He got her wet! Clean her up, Mac!" It was memorable baptism that we and all who were there that morning may never forget.

As we read Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus, there are aspects of the event that would have made it memorable also--both to Jesus and to those who were baptized with him at the River Jordan. Luke says that when Jesus was baptized,

"...the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Luke combines what seems to be both an inner and an outer experience. The descending dove "in bodily form" would presumably have been visible to others. The inner voice, "**You are my beloved Son...**" seems to have been addressed to Jesus alone, at least as Luke tells it. For Matthew the voice is more of a public announcement. "*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." For Luke the experience is more personal.

There are memorable elements in the baptism of Jesus. But all four of the gospel writers emphasize the *fact* of Jesus' baptism far more than any of the *details* of it. That is especially the case in the Gospel of Luke. Listen again to how understated is Luke's telling of the baptism of Jesus.

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove..."

Surprisingly, Luke does not say where the baptism of Jesus took place--or even who baptized Jesus. From the other gospel accounts we know that his baptism was by John in the Jordan River. But Luke does not even describe the baptism of Jesus until it is over. **"...when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying..."** Then, Luke says, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the voice of God assured him, **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."**

I am not sure what to make of that--except to say that for Luke the details of Jesus' baptism are clearly far less important than its meaning. The place and person doing the baptism recede into the background of the narrative, while the Holy Spirit and the voice of God confirming Jesus' identity as the beloved Son of God stand at the center of the story.

The same is true for us today. Consider your own baptism. Is there anything you remember about it? Do you know who baptized you and where? I hope so. I was baptized on January 16, 1944, at the First Presbyterian Church in Clinton. My grandfather, Dr. John McSween, conducted the baptism. At the time my father was overseas in North Africa in WW II. I have a yellowed copy of the service in my study which I read again the other day. At one point in the service my grandfather asked, "Do you here and now in this solemn and precious rite, publicly express that faith in your hearts in which you have already given this child to God; and do you acknowledge God's right to employ him as He pleases in His service and to His glory?" Little did he or I know. At the end of the service he prayed in part, "Let his life be precious in Thy sight...and may his little fingers so entwine the heart-strings of the parents that they may be bound by unbreakable ties of holy love." I'm sure it was a powerful and emotional service indeed. Even reading it now, it still is.

And yet, no matter who had performed the service, I would still have been every bit as much a baptized member of the body of Christ. It is not the one who performs the baptism who gives it its meaning. It is the **triune God alone**.

That is more important that it may sound at first. One of the great controversies in the early church involved this very issue. Under the threat of persecution in the early centuries of the church's life, there were ministers who renounced their faith. To keep from being fed to the lions in the arena at Rome, they denied everything they once had professed.

If that were the case, how do you think you would feel about your baptism? Wouldn't it at least make you wonder about its validity? Or suppose you were baptized by one who later proved morally or theologically unfit. Would that make you any less a member of the body of Christ? That's an issue that was tearing the church apart in the 4th century until it was addressed by the greatest theologian and bishop of the early church, St. Augustine.

One of the things that keeps theology interesting is the way in which theological issues never seem to go away for long. The relationship between the meaning of baptism and how and by whom it is performed is still an issue for some today. If you were a Roman Catholic, how do you think you would

feel about your baptism if the priest who performed it was later convicted of molesting children? Wouldn't you be tempted to ask that it be done again by a more worthy priest?

Protestants face the same issue. Suppose the minister who baptized you ran off with the church organist and got kicked out of the church. Would that make you think twice about your baptism? Perhaps--perhaps not. But the more seriously you take your baptism, the more important it is to insist that the **meaning of baptism does not depend on the person who performs it or the manner in which it was performed.**

You may have been baptized by the worst scoundrel in the ministry. Or you may have screamed at the top of your lungs and thrown up on the minister, as a couple of infants have done to me over the years. But whatever the circumstances of your baptism, in your baptism you are joined to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, and to his people throughout time and space. And nothing can alter that fact!

So even if you don't remember a thing about your baptism, even if in every other way it seems questionable, you don't have to be rebaptized in order to get it right. When you are baptized with water into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--you are baptized for all eternity! You may not remember your baptism, but **God does.** That's what really matters! The effect of baptism is rooted entirely in the promises of an ever-faithful God, who declares, "**I have called you by name; you are mine.**" Mine forever!

Some of you may know about the long-running "discussion" I used to have with Spears Lee about her desire to be rebaptized. I kept telling her that Presbyterians don't do such a thing. To rebaptize would be to question the integrity of God's promises in our original baptism. But what I did tell her that I would be happy to do, and what we will do later this morning, is to give her an opportunity to **reaffirm** the promise of baptism.

Because God's promises in baptism are trustworthy and true, we don't need to be rebaptized. But we do need to reaffirm continually our commitment to the One who has called and claimed us as his own. The Christian life is a daily dying to sin and rising to newness of life in Christ. We don't just commit ourselves to Jesus Christ once and for all. We do so every day, every moment of our lives. It is said of Martin Luther that in his moments of doubt and depression he would touch his forehead and say, "*Baptizatus sum.*" "I have been baptized!" No matter how I may feel at the moment, Jesus Christ has called and claimed me as his own, and he will not abandon me. "**I have been baptized!**"

In just a moment we will reaffirm the promises of our baptism. Trusting the gracious mercy of God, I will encourage you once again to renounce evil and its power in your life and to turn from the ways of sin and death by turning again to the Savior whose love will not let you go. Everyday you and I are challenged to choose whom we will serve by turning from evil and turning to Jesus Christ.

The details of your baptism are not what matter. What matters are the **powerful promises of a faithful God!** In your baptism the Lord God declares, "You are my beloved child; with whom I am well-pleased." That is who you are in baptism--a beloved child of God. Not because I say so, but because the **Lord God** says so. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

Goodness knows, the world will feed you all sorts of nonsense about who you are and to whom you belong. The world loves to slap labels on people. Some are flattering--some are offensive. Winner/loser, success/failure, debutante/trailer trash, jock/nerd. It is not just "the world," that labels us. We label ourselves. We all have a concept of who we are that is formed over the years--especially during those crucial years in jr. and senior high school. A number of years ago I read an article entitled "You Never Outgrow High_School." In all too many cases that is true. Well into our adult years we still think of ourselves in terms of who we were and how we were treated in high school. Scary thought!

What is your self-image? And how does that image fit with the image others have of you? We all have a difficult time thinking of ourselves rightly. We shift back and forth between thinking too highly and too lowly of ourselves. A 1989 the Educational Testing Service at Princeton did a study of math skills that compared students in eight different countries. In the study American students ranked lowest in mathematical competence while Korean students ranked the highest. But when the researchers asked the students to rate themselves as to how good they thought they were in math—guess what? Right! The American students rated themselves the highest and Korean students rated themselves the lowest. Our self-perception is often at odds with reality.

Who sees and knows us as we really are? To whom, in the words of an old prayer, are "all hearts open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets can be hid"? Only the Lord God omnipotent. The One who has called us by name is the One whom the psalmist says has **"searched us and known us...and is acquainted with all our ways."** (Psalm 139)

It is God and God alone who sees and knows us as we truly are. The One who alone stands in judgment over us is the one who in his baptism joins himself to us. Jesus immerses himself in the stream of our conflicted human lives. In sharing baptism with us, he unites himself to us for ever. The Apostle Paul declares, **"Our lives are hid with Christ in God."** As we belong to Jesus Christ through the bonds of baptism, the Lord declares of us, as well, **"You are my beloved child. With you I am well-pleased."**

That is not a verdict you can render on yourself. You cannot stand in front of a mirror and tell yourself how good you are without more than a little self-deception. You cannot begin to see what is wrong in your life apart from the searching love of God in Jesus Christ. The only one who sees and knows us as we truly are is the beloved Son who shares with us the waters of baptism, and who embraces us as his own for ever.

Luke tells his story of the baptism of Jesus in a way that does not invite us to focus on the specific details--just as he would not invite us to focus on the specific details of our own baptism. Instead, Luke invites us to remember that in our baptism we share a powerful bond with our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Just as the voice of God declared to him, **"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased,"** so he says to you and to me this day, **"You are my beloved child of the covenant."** No matter what others may say about you. No matter what you may say about yourself, it is my word that truly matters. And **"I have called you by name; you are mine...for time and eternity."** Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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