

Sermon preached June 26, 2011
Rev. Kerry McIntyre
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Duncan

Why we baptize babies

Acts 8: 26-40 and 10: 44-48

Romans 5:8

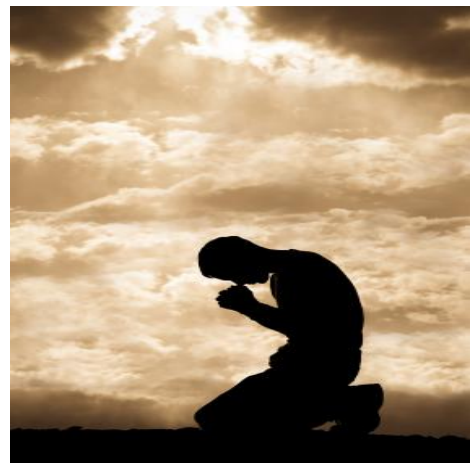
John 15: 16

I love baptizing babies. It's not just how sweet the children are – although there is something quite wondrous and holy that seems to linger about a child. Remember the old adage that a baby is God's opinion the world should go on?



I think of that every time I walk down the aisle with a newly baptized baby and speak those ancient words that *this child is now received into the holy catholic church and is appointed to be God's faithful soldier and servant until their life's end. And behold, what love the Father has bestowed, that we should be called the children of God, and we are.*

By the way, I should add a word of explanation lest any be confused. Those words go back to baptism liturgies used by the church as far back as the third century, and I repeat them because they link us with this great reality that the church of Christ is not just us here in St. Andrew's at this little point in time. We belong to a family of faith and communion of saints that stretches around the world and throughout time – that is what the holy catholic church is. The church is holy because it belongs to Jesus. It is catholic which means "worldwide" or "universal", because the church is wherever knees bow and tongues confess that Christ is Lord. So too now does the baby who was baptized belong to this huge, loving family. It is a family of faith that has pledged to be so welcoming, so encouraging, so busy at reminding, forgiving and forth-telling, and so determinedly praying, that this little one will never for one moment forget who they are as a child of God or whose they are as a cherished, precious member of the royal household of the Lord.



I love baptizing babies, I said, and partly that is because of the unmistakable look of love and pride that radiates from the faces of those family members and friends who especially claim that little one as their own, but also in the joy and expectancy of all the honorary brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and grandparents in the congregation who are there to adopt this little one into the fellowship, but more importantly, into their arms

and into their hearts. I love when the assisting elder speaks those words of promise on behalf of the whole congregation that the whole Body of Christ is joined together in this holy task of ensuring the baptized child will grow and mature and live out their life as a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

But I think the reason I love baptizing little ones the most is that it is such a wondrous reminder of the miracle and meaning of grace. William Willimon, in a book on baptism



entitled *Remember Who You Are*, wrote this: *Wherever salvation is conceived of as an individual accomplishment, the result of human action, decision or belief, then infant baptism will appear meaningless. Obviously a baby is not good at doing the right action, deciding for itself, or believing the right belief. Nothing could be more incapable of individual achievement than a little, helpless, dependent baby. A baby must have everything done for it if it is to survive.*

But wherever salvation is viewed primarily as a gift, the corporate bestowal of something which cannot be earned, merited, achieved or bought, then babies may be baptized. The only requirement to receive a gift is to be receptive. The only requirement to be helped is to be helpless. And what is more receptive, helpless, dependent, weak and needy than a baby? Precisely!

Why do you think Jesus told his disciples that the Kingdom belonged to little ones, and that only as we received the kingdom like a child, would we be able to enter into it. When we baptize, be the baptizee a few weeks old, a few years old or a few decades old, we are saying something very profound about our relationship with and dependency upon God. We are saying that salvation is not a self-help enterprise. We are saying that being wrapped up in the strong loving arms of God and of his church is not something that we've been able to do and or could accomplish for ourselves. We are saying that our hope of life in fellowship with the Almighty here and now and eternally has everything to do with the fact that grace is a gift, an act of mercy bestowed through the power and purpose of God alone.

Jodie and Jennifer baptized here this morning and Aaron who will be baptized this afternoon – I hate to rain on any parade of self-achievement – but the baptism service is not about you. It's all about God and what he has done for us through his Son. While we can rejoice as these three adults make their profession of faith, what is far more significant and what is only and utterly of importance is not that they have chosen to trust God but that God chose them. God chose to send his Son to die for them, for us all. "You did not choose me but I chose you," Jesus told his disciples, and nothing has changed in two thousand years.



Friends, God chose to redeem us through the power of the blood of Christ. God chose to make us his own and adopt us into his family through his saving mercies. And while you and I and every child who is baptized is called to spend the rest of our lives discovering who we really are in Christ and to rejoice in our having been adopted, we do that only by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who is the author and giver of any power of faith we may have.

And there is no point when either the few week old baby or few years old child or few decades young disciple ever becomes so mature, so strong, so learned, so self-sufficient or so adept at love that they will not be utterly and completely dependent upon God who has loved us, adopted us, chosen us and who alone can bring us home.

God me dependent

St. Paul wrote that magnificent assertion to the Romans that while we were yet powerless, Christ died for us. The Revised Standard Version translates the passage: while we were yet helpless. The Contemporary English version reads “while we were yet helpless and sinful” while *The Message* translates the phrase this way: while we were of no use to him whatever. To a very real extent, Paul might as well had said, where we were yet babies, in all our helplessness, weakness, neediness and dependency, Christ died for us.

Someone once said that in the Bible we soon discover that God always seeks and saves the weak and helpless – and only the weak and helpless. The strong and self-sufficient need no saviour so they get none. Or as another sage put it, it’s hard to be filled with the grace of God when you are already full of your self-importance. In baptism, we are saying that it is precisely because we are all of us weak and are helpless to save ourselves that God has acted in mercy and grace on our behalf, and gave his Son for our salvation.

Baptism reminds us about that nature of grace. The new life we have in Christ is a gift. Pure and simple. No string attached. It’s on the house. It is not our understanding of the gift that brings the gift; if grace depended on our capacity to realize it fully or even partially, then grace would not be grace.

That’s not to minimize the importance of learning about the majesty and miracle of grace or growing in knowledge of our faith. But it is not our understanding, our maturity, or even our decision for Christ that saves us, any more than it is by our striving to be moral enough, kind enough or religious enough that gets us not only through heaven’s gateway. It is God’s grace that saves us, and baptism points to that gift and promise. When we baptize, we are declaring that it is God’s grace alone that is sufficient for us, God’s grace alone that is poured out free and unmerited and undeserved. It is God’s grace that is our hope, our salvation, and our joy.

And it is not just that we can’t earn it; we can’t and don’t have to, pay for it. That is, grace is not like a meal in a five star restaurant that the waiter kindly provides for us, along with clean silverware and a nice napkin, only to present us with the hefty invoice after dessert and coffee. You’ve had the meal, now pay up. While in thankfulness and awe we may spend



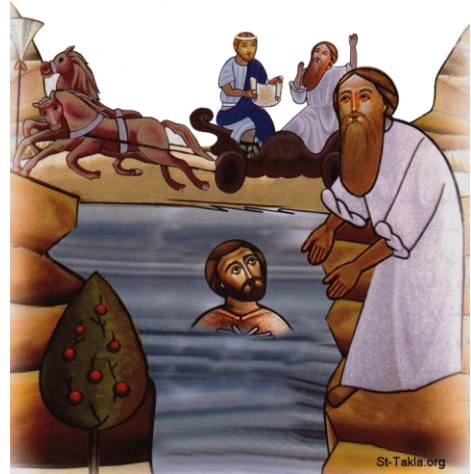
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the rest of our lives worshipping and praising and seeking to bless God through our grateful service, our worship and praise and most sacrificial service will never ever equal what God has given us. There is no balancing of accounts with God so that are someday no longer beholden on his mercy or get ourselves “paid up in full” in terms of the debt of love we owe.

But what about the place of faith, of believing, someone might ask. Isn’t faith a prerequisite for

baptism? Doesn't scripture say that he who believes and is baptized will be saved? (Mark 16:16). Didn't the Ethiopian eunuch or Cornelius and his household come to faith in Christ first, before they were baptized?

Yes indeed! But the matter is not quite so simple. In the New Testament, don't forget, faith itself is always and only God's gift to us. God provides the power to believe; it is no more our achievement than is grace. Faith is not the human contribution to the cost of our salvation; if it were, then faith would simply be one more human work by which we in essence save ourselves. Paul is very clear that faith is the opposite of works (Romans 3:27, Galatians 2:16, Titus 3: 5-7), lest anyone should boast, and it matters little whether we mean works of trust, tithing, feelings, decisions or any other human-initiated response.



Faith itself is God's gift to us. As Will Willimon again says: *Faith happens when I am grasped by God, not when I grope around for God. Faith comes, not when we accept Christ but as God in Christ accepts us and we receive that acceptance. In other words, faith comes to you in the same way that life comes to you – as a gift. You do nothing to earn that life nor do you do anything to earn abundant, eternal life. You simply receive it. You live it. Faith is like that.*

Again, that is why I love baptizing babies because it is so obvious that there is nothing that that infant did to get themselves born. Life is given. A gift. Faith is given. A gift. Grace is given. A gift. And the giver, the great lover of our souls, is none other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.



Baptism is the outrageous declaration of our utter dependency upon the mercy and goodness and power and presence of God in our lives. I've said it many times, but because we are all of us such slow learners, it can't be repeated often enough: if in any way, our salvation depends upon anything that we have to do, accomplish, perform, provide, achieve, or merit in any way, we are toast. I am a sinner. I fall short of the glory of God, and not short by an inch or two, or a millimetre or three. I fall short of the glory of God by a hundred million miles. I am stained through and through with sin, folly, ignorance, selfishness and pride. In and of myself there is and always will be absolutely nothing of goodness or merit upon which I can so much as pretend to beg God's consideration or kindness. Only by grace, only because God chose to choose me in Christ, only because God gave his Son to die for me and to wash me in the precious flow of his blood, am I saved. Only by grace am I, helpless, hopeless, unable-to-save-himself-sinner, saved and set free, forgiven and adopted as a child of God. Thanks be to God!

Now, let me make one vitally important qualification. When I say that I love to baptize babies, and adults, there is one crucial element that needs to be emphasized and affirmed, and that is the place and work of the believing community of faith. Baptism does not happen

in isolation. Baptism is the sacrament of the church. It is the church, this community of faith that bears the burden and command to baptize and make disciples. We are the gifted ones who are to give the gift to others. Baptism may incorporate the baptized person into the family of faith, but baptism ought also to remind us the church of who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. Baptism reminds us of our calling to grow in grace, and to be engaged in the ongoing work of remembering, telling, reminding, encouraging the baptized person and one another as to who we are and whose we are – the friends and followers of Jesus.



You see, it there is an issue of being fit and ready, competent, responsible and prepared, as a prerequisite for baptism, that has primarily to do with us, the baptizers, and whether we are prepared and disciplined and ready to fulfill our vows as the people of God responsible for the ongoing nurture and blessing of the person baptized. Again, whatever the age or experience of the person being baptized, our task as the church remains absolutely the same. It is to ensure that through all our ministries, through our fellowship, through our prayers for and around them, we are telling them again and again that they belong to Jesus and that he is absolutely relentless in holding them fast in his grip of grace. Our task it to help them know all there is to know about the wondrous love the Father has bestowed in adopting them and us into his family and calling us his children. Our task is to model with all the energy and determination and creativity we have within us to live out with and towards one another the graciousness and joy of being the chosen of Jesus. Our task is to teach and encourage, celebrate and support, heal and bless them and one another so that, as Paul prayed for the Ephesians, we all of us reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

The story is told of the minister having two people to baptize one morning. The first was a three month old infant. After baptizing her, the pastor held the child in his arms and said: "Mary, we've baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the Story, and to remind you always who you are as God's beloved, and to keep you in his family. We've adopted you as our sister in Christ, and we will never let you go. We've promised to pray for you, and we will. We've promised to teach you, and we will. We've promise to guide you and watch over and help you grow in faith, and we will. Most of all, we've promised to love you with Jesus' love, and through his help and Spirit, we will." And then the church, God's people, cried out a hearty "Amen!"



Then he baptized a seventy-two year old man who had only recently opened his heart to Jesus and his grace. The minister said to him, "Tom, we've baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the Story, and to remind you always who you are as God's beloved, and

to keep you in his family. We've adopted you as our brother in Christ, and we will never let you go. We've promised to pray for you, and we will. We've promised to teach you, and we will. We've promise to guide you and watch over and help you grow in faith, and we will. Most of all, we've promised to love you with Jesus' love, and through his help and Spirit, we will." And then the church, God's people, cried out a hearty "Amen!"



This morning, and again this afternoon, we will baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit, in which we declare the amazing grace of God upon the person baptized and upon us all, and together affirm our calling to live and love in Jesus' name. And with a hearty cry, all God's people say "Amen!"

