

From time to time it's important for us to reflect upon the significance of baptism. It's especially appropriate for us to focus on baptism this Sunday morning. Both because we celebrate the great privilege of baptizing Ella and Andrew and Alex into Christ's Church, but also because this is the second Sunday of Lent—the season set aside for preparing all of us, Christ's Church, for the high point of our calendar. (Never mind the church calendar: the high point of all of history!)

For better or worse, our understanding of baptism has evolved, or devolved, a great deal since the early Church. Early on (by the 2nd Century) people were allowed to be baptized, the only way to enter into the church, just once each year: on Easter Sunday. These last few weeks leading up to Easter were a time of prayer and fasting and intense instruction (in the gospels and the articles of the creeds of the day) for those choosing to be baptized. Believe it or not, those weeks followed a 3-year period of preparation for those wanting to join the Church. During that 3-year period, those “catechumens,” those in training, were comprehensively instructed and monitored by an “episkopos” or overseer in the church, and they needed to be found worthy. Back then they understood the Christian faith to be an all-or-nothing affair.

Those prospective new church members needed to show ethical consistency; they needed to show evidence of “conversion”—that they had already turned around their lifestyle, their habits, their worldview, until all these bore witness to their new life in Christ. They needed to be found worthy beforehand to enter into their local church. [Our early Congregationalist forebears also mirrored this practice: deacons examined prospective new church members for evidence of an encounter with the Holy Spirit of Christ and evidence of a changed life.] The prospective new members were allowed to sing some of the hymns and hear the Scriptures and the sermon, but these “catechumens” were dismissed from the Worship Service with a prayer and a blessing before Communion. [The church would not even consider accepting prostitutes, pimps, gladiators, circus performers, actors, or astrologers—they required an absolute break with pagan allegiances and lifestyles.] [This historical account, along with a lot of helpful insight on baptism, comes from *Remember Who You Are*, by William Willimon.]

Their understanding of God's grace was different from ours—and they had obviously never heard of the covenant system—but it's remarkable to me that the early fledgling Church, struggling for its very survival, for its life, took so seriously its responsibility to follow the command of the resurrected Jesus, the Head of the Church: “Go, baptize, and make disciples of all the peoples...” [Matthew 28:20] They understood Christians are “made, not born,” (Tertullian) and that the goal of the church was to “go and make disciples.” The Christian faith was not, is not, a “do it yourself” “me and God” mail-order venture. Baptism was not just a ceremonial nicety: it had to do with inviting people into, and teaching them—initiating them, at great length and expense—how to live a radically new life among a community of people living a radically new life. Baptism was not an individual, but rather a corporate affair.

A lot has changed since then, but this is how the early Christians made new Christians. Then as now: Christ's Church is always fighting for survival; we are always just one generation from extinction.

It's always a challenge to try to translate understandings and practices from one era to another. People will not necessarily agree exactly what counts as gain and what counts as loss over these past nineteen centuries in Christ's Church. But the passing of time only underscores the fact that every generation, every one of us, is a child of our own age. In our age, in this country, we have been trained to come at things from our side, not God's. We naturally ask, "What does baptism mean to me, or to us?" rather than "What does baptism mean to God? What is God doing in Baptism?" From this perspective, we might conclude only that baptism serves as a reminder: a reminder that God loves us, a reminder to us, the church, to accept responsibility for those being baptized, a reminder to all us parents to try to get our kids to Sunday School and maybe Logos. Baptism reduced to helpful reminder.

We have also been subtly trained to judge things by how they affect us, as if our feelings are paramount. "What good is baptism for a baby, or a child, who may not even remember it when they grow up?" "What good is baptism to me, if I don't feel anything?" Some of us have been trained to believe "baptism does no good if we do not understand what's happening." "Baptism is not magic." "Baptism will be of no use unless the parents can keep bringing the children to church, so it 'takes.'" "You don't need to be baptized to enter into the Church." "Baptism is only a ritual." We are pretty good at knowing what baptism is not. It all makes you wonder, as Willimon asks, "Then why in the world did Jesus command us to do something so tiny, so ineffective, so unnecessary, as baptism?"

If we are so good at knowing what baptism is not, then what is it?

Baptism is God's action, not ours. (It is always true that we can ignore or misunderstand or refuse to act upon God's grace, but we cannot nullify what God has done. We can miss out on the blessings of God; we can treat them as of no value—but the wiser we get the more we learn it has been our loss to neglect them. Still, however we respond or fail to respond, God keeps reaching out to us and calling us home. Baptism is God's initiating action. Neither Ella nor Andrew nor Alex nor any of us can baptize ourselves.

Baptism is God's answer to our deepest question: "Who am I?" There's no shortage of answers to that question. Even children have internalized plenty of their own answers: "You are a slow learner." "You do not sit quietly and behave in class as nicely as the girls do." "You are uncoordinated." "You are not very popular." "You never come in first." "You are nice but not that pretty." We parents try hard never to say these things; their teachers are trained not to say these things—but somehow children get the message anyway, loud and clear.

"Who am I?" We adults hear plenty of answers to that question, too. A lot of it will bring us down a few pegs. "I think you've been drinking a lot more lately." "We've had to downsize, and we've had to make difficult decisions, and you'd better put out your resume." "You are almost never home with the kids." "If only you would apply yourself."

"Who am I?" Some of the compliments we hear can be even more dangerous. "Have you lost weight? You look terrific." "You live in Newport Coast now? Hey, that's great..." "You sold your company? I know you worked hard. Congratulations." The compliments are not the problem—but so often they only reinforce the false values so prevalent all around: you are no better than your appearance, your accomplishment,

your affluence. You have no inherent value—so it all comes down to what you achieve or how you look. This is a huge challenge around here, isn't it? The more we identify with our achievements, the more deaf we become to the voice of the Good Shepherd who knows better: who knows who we really are, and what we are really like, and who would set us free from all those false answers misdefining who we are.

“Who am I?” The church, and we preachers, do not always help. People are apt to hear primarily, “The human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked...” “All we, like sheep, have gone astray.” “Narrow is the gate leading to life, and broad is the path to destruction...” “You are not generous enough with your giving.” “You are not industrious enough in evangelizing your neighbors.” “You are not diligent enough with your prayers.” “You should join the church, get in the game, instead of remaining a spectator.” You get the idea. You are apt to hear, even in the church, “You are not good enough.”

“Who am I?” Baptism is not just another voice, but an action: an action from God telling us, “You who have been baptized have been received into My family, beyond all doubt and question and misgiving—you belong to Me.” No matter our wrong emphasis on human sin, human misunderstanding, human limitations, human disappointment, or lack of human feelings or changed human lives: in baptism *God* has acted. Even when we may be hearing “you should start living right or believing right or praying right or tithing right or covenanting right or serving the poor right...”—hardly good news—there is baptism, showing us all something very different.

(We know baptism does not make us any more loved by God; God loves us independent of our baptismal status. And remember the thief on the cross next to Jesus who heard in his dying moments, before he could be baptized, “This day you will be with me in Paradise...” But he was in an unusual position. The usual way to enter in to Christ's Church is and has been via baptism. Being baptized does not change God; it changes us. As Luther observed: “Baptism is valid, even if faith is lacking. For my faith does not create baptism, but receives and responds to it.” *The Large Catechism*)

We are not merely sinners who are going to die apart from what is made alive in Christ; we are not merely overgrown children who are not smart enough or thin enough or rich enough or successful enough. We may live in a lift-yourself up-by-your-boostraps self-help society, in which we are encouraged to “make it happen,” but baptism is God's action. We do not have to “make it happen.” In baptism, it has already happened. We may feel we have to impress others all our life, but we do not have to impress God.

That earliest church, when they gathered Easter Sunday morning to baptize the year's new crop of new Christians into the church, most likely surrounded them and sang a special baptismal hymn to them: “You [newest members of Christ's Church] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation set apart, a people named and claimed by God as His own particular possession...” You do not have to prove yourself right with God: you already *are* right with God. This is the good news. You are royalty; you are adopted sons and daughters of the most High King. You are already invited into the royal Castle, into the royal Banquet Hall; yours are the best seats in the House—and you have already begun entering in.”

And you all know: this is not true because you and I were already OK with God, not because you and I are such overachievers, the “pick of the crop” so impressive to God

or to our neighbors. Not because sin doesn't matter and we are all doing just fine on our own. On the contrary—we are not just fine on our own. We know all too well. (The problems only compound when we begin to live as if we're already OK with God, as if we deserve all we have received. Such hubris leads to all sorts of deceptions and false masks, all sorts of insecurities about others discovering our innermost secret that we are really not all that worthy, not who people think we are. (Such self-deception, so deep and so constant, makes people strangely unable to enter into trusting relationships, the only satisfying kind. Whoever falls under its spell—the “I am impressive; I deserve it all” spell—like the evil witch staring into the “mirror, mirror, on the wall...”—only grows more and more distorted in their self-perception and in their relationships.)

[[Baptism concisely summarizes and focuses the entire history of the Old Testament: for whatever reason, God chose Abraham and Sarah; God chose their children and grandchildren. God chose and shaped and spoke to and trained and taught and agonized over and wept over and allowed His heart to be broken again and again by a particular covenant people—the Israelites, the Jews. Out of all the tribes of the earth, out of all the really powerful civilizations to choose from, God chose the Jews. At times they were faithful to their covenant, and they obeyed the Law and respected the prophets God sent among them, and enjoyed the blessings—and at times they faltered, and forgot, and hardened their hearts and behaved very badly. But God, on His side, never forgot about them, never abandoned them, never returned their adultery in kind. (And within this people God chose a class to be especially close to Him: the priests. The priests were the ones with direct access to God in the temple; they could offer sacrifices, they were called especially to pray and commune with God. They were chosen by God for high privilege and high responsibility.) Those being baptized would hear all this covenant history of the faithfulness of God recapitulated in the words to that baptismal hymn: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.”

The constancy of God's mercy did not stop, of course, with the Old Testament. The twelve apostles could be famously dense about understanding what Jesus was trying to tell them, and about trusting in their Lord. We remember Peter and his timely betrayal. Yet later Jesus saw fit to entrust His Church into Peter's leadership. We know about the women who flocked around Jesus: women of reputation lost, futures bleak—women whom the world had surely been telling in countless and painful ways who they were. They had believed it until they came to understand from Jesus who they *really* were. As they kept coming back to Jesus, over time, they learned from Him a different answer to the puzzle of their deepest identities—so then, and only then, they could live new lives.]]

And it makes all the difference in how we live once we know who we are. Who we are leads to how we live, not backwards. This order is preserved over and over again in the epistles, and in what we heard this morning: “Once you were nobodies; in Christ, in baptism, you are adopted, made to be somebodies. *Therefore*, that being true, now it makes sense to talk about your conduct, to direct/coach you as to your behavior. *Now* go out and live so purely among the outsiders that even they who malign you now will one day give glory to God as a result of your witness.”

Over the long haul, your actions and your life will reflect your deepest sense of who you believe yourself to be. Prisoners set free so often wind up right back behind bars: their circumstances change, but their self-identity does not. They live right down to their self-perception.

If you watched the Olympics you saw how the arena of intense pressure has a way of stripping away the veneers of false confidence, and revealing deep self-understandings. Under such scrutiny, the most expert athletes in the world falter and mess up the jumps they have successfully performed thousands of times in practice. Their actions conform, under pressure, to their deep sense of who they are. (In my line, tennis, I remember being impressed, though not surprised, when hearing how Bjorn Borg, who won Wimbledon five times, had dreams in which he kept hitting shots that raised up white chalk dust from hitting the lines on Centre Court. I was not surprised: Borg played as if pressure meant nothing to him. Even at his deepest subconscious levels, his identity and self-understanding was that he was champion. His performance simply mirrored that sense of identity.)

We here are not Olympians—but we we get the point. Olympic-size pressure surely reveals “what athletes are made of” in just a few moments—but if we give it a little time, sure enough life itself turns just as surely reveals who we are, “what we’re made of.” Our everyday lives and years and decades prove plenty reliable, no? Handling the carpool every day; dealing with the impossibly difficult manager in your office; facing the gnawing loneliness; “hanging in there” in your difficult marriage creatively, with grace and hopefulness—or having the courage to call it quits when it’s over. Paying the price to be faithful parents; making ethical decisions; juggling family, work, church, community, and your other responsibilities; “pruning” and praying and growing and supporting loved ones and taking the right risks and following in whatever direction, and in whatever particulars, the Holy Spirit is leading you...doesn’t your own life do a pretty good job of revealing who you are?

In the face of such pressure, our feelings are too flimsy. We have learned the hard way we ourselves are not infallible designers of our own destiny nor entirely trustworthy in following even our own best plans for ourselves. Yes, we trust in the love of God shown us in Jesus, and in His Spirit leading us today. Absolutely. But baptism is God’s clear action toward us in this lifetime.

(If any think that may be too big a claim for baptism, recall the Baptism of our Lord Jesus in the Jordan River. Although John the Baptist performed that rite, it was surely an action of God—accompanied by the presence of God (taking the form of something like a dove coming down) and the voice of God from the heavens. After His baptism, Jesus was clear about His identity and fully focused in pursuing His mission on earth. He was single-minded; He lived His life in absolute integrity, consistent with His deepest identity as the Son of God.)

We here do not dunk babies in the Jordan River, but water is water. It’s just the symbol. We do not expect to hear the voice of God or see the semblance of a dove coming down, but God is present and active here. You have been marked with the sign of the cross on your foreheads: some of you in ashes, a week ago Wednesday; almost all of you have been marked with the same cross in the waters of baptism. You have been indelibly marked thru God’s action to set you apart as a royal priesthood, a people set apart and claimed as His own.

So you know to Whom you belong. So you know you have been elected into the household of faith, and adopted as a beloved child of the King. You know who you are.

So you can relax. The rest is just details. You live out your life according to your deepest understanding of who you are. You have been baptized. Accordingly you have a

new status, a new identity in Christ. You could misunderstand who you are, or try to ignore your new identity, or fail to live like real royalty, or pretend you do not have a new status. "But what you cannot do is get unbaptized again." [NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone*]

That's how, and that's why, you now live honorably among others; why you proclaim the mighty deeds of Him who called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:4-12

Come to [the Lord Jesus], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands written in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.