

Remember You Are Baptized

Baptism – Year B, Proper 17 – James 1:22

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 30, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

[Since at the 10:00 service, we've got not one but *two* baptisms, I thought it would be a good time to talk to y'all a bit more about baptism.] One of my clearest childhood memories is of a baptism service. By now, pretty much everybody knows that I was not raised as an Episcopalian. And most of you even know that my father was a lay-preacher in that other denomination. To put food on the family table he taught junior high school history and science. But until I was six, Sunday mornings found Dad in the pulpit of the Greenville, Ohio United Missionary Church. Every Sunday morning, that is, unless there was to be a baptism.

They didn't sprinkle folks at Greenville United Missionary Church. They didn't dip water from a font. They didn't even dunk folks in an in-the-church pool like you might see at say, the Baptists across the street. No, when there was to be a baptism service at the Greenville United Missionary Church, everyone gathered at the river, or rather we gathered at Greenville Creek. It didn't matter that the banks were a little muddy. It didn't matter that the Ohio summer made the air practically wringeable. It didn't matter that the mosquitoes outnumbered the congregation at least twenty to one. When it was time for baptism, *everyone* came out. In spite of the heat and the mud and the bugs, most everybody wore his or her Sunday best. Daddy, though, with his obligatory starched white shirt, Daddy wore a special pair of brown pants, along with a pair of shoes that he only wore to wade into the creek because they had been in the water so often that they would no longer take polish. And for each of the candidates for baptism, the women of the church provided a white robe just for the occasion.

One by one the candidates were lead into the flowing water. Standing waist deep, they each testified to the faith they had in the Father, and the love they had for Jesus. Then Dad would place a folded hankie over their mouth and nose, and they were *dunked* three times – once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Ghost. As each of the newly baptized came up out of the creek, the people sang. The ladies who sat down front on the right at the church meetings, waved their hankies in the air with one hand while fanning themselves with paper fans from the local funeral home with the other. People shouted halleluias, and people clapped their hands. There was reason to celebrate. Another lost soul had seen the light and had come to publicly proclaim their faith. I stood on the banks in my own white shirt and the little blue shorts I wore at the time, and clapped and shouted and sang with everyone else – and drank it all in.

We had moved to Arizona by the time I was eleven and it was *my* turn to testify, and to step down into the water. But this earlier scene is indelibly imprinted on my memory, because it clearly illustrates baptism as an unmistakable, unambiguous, unequivocal public sign of obedience to God's will.

In the winter of 1988, Jenny, the boys and I were stationed in Germany, preparing for a trip home for Christmas. For several years, our family had been Army-chapel Protestants. You know, a little bit of everything, depending on which chaplain was in charge that week. So when my brother, who had married an Episcopalian, called and asked Jenny and I to be Godparents for my niece Elizabeth's baptism, I wasn't quite sure how to react. As you might figure, there were no such things as godparents when I was growing up. But my brother assured me that there was nothing in the Episcopalian service of baptism with which I would have a problem, so we agreed.

The service itself went pretty much like [all the baptisms that you all have seen right here at St. Paul's over the years][the one you will see here shortly]. Here in this service that was, at that time, totally foreign to me, I learned something about Baptism that I had never seen before. This little girl, just a few months old, with no ability whatsoever to do a single thing on her own – this tiny baby that very day became a full-fledged Christian. Scarcely ten minutes after she had been baptized, the priest broke off just a sliver of the host and Elizabeth was fed with the same spiritual food that every Christian receives from our Lord's table. Though promises were made on her behalf, little Liz made no profession of faith. She made no statement of obedience to God's will. She did absolutely nothing but be her precious little self. She became a Christian through no personal profession or act of faith. She became a Christian through *nothing* she did. She became a Christian *solely* as a result of God's grace.

It is *that* aspect of baptism – as a sign of God's grace working in our lives – that is so clearly demonstrated when we baptize [our youngest] [those even much younger than Bianna] into the Body of Christ.

If these two aspects of baptism were all – if baptism were *only* declaring our faith, and understanding our reliance on God's grace – I suspect pretty much everybody here would be all set. We received the grace initially at our baptism, and *since* then, through feeding on Christ's body and blood. And somewhere along the line, we have each professed our personal faith in the Father, and our love of Jesus.

But baptism has still another dimension – one of *action*. As James reminds us in this morning's Epistle reading, we are to “be *doers* of the word, and *not* merely hearers.” Through our baptism we are filled with God's grace. Through our baptism we identify ourselves with God's plan. And through our baptism we are commissioned and empowered to serve Christ by serving the *world* in his name. God's grace is freely given in baptism, but it *does* come with responsibilities. It's right there in the Baptismal Covenant that each of us renews at every baptism, [the Covenant that we will renew in just a few moments]. We *promise*, with God's help, to love our neighbor as ourselves. We promise with God's *help*, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of *every* human being. We promise, with God's help, to seek and serve Christ in all persons. And we promise, with God's help, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

In making these vows, we affirm that baptism is not an *ending*, but just the *beginning*. The beginning of a new life in Christ. The beginning of a life of faith in God's plan for us. The beginning of a life absolutely dependent on God's grace. And perhaps most of all, the beginning of a life of service – to God, and to one another.

The great reformer, Martin Luther once said, that in times of torment, trial, and temptation, he would remind himself, *aloud*, “You are baptized!” And maybe that would be good advice for each of *us*. When you wonder whether the Father can possibly forgive your sins, every one of them, every time – remember that you are *baptized!* When it looks like it can't get any darker, and the light seems only a distant memory – remember that you are *baptized!* When you begin to think that you are abandoned, that you are alone, that there's no one who cares what you're going through – remember that you are *baptized!* When you think that you can sit comfortably by in your pew while others suffer and despair, when others are trapped in darkness, when others need to be forgiven, when others are ignorant of the hope that we know for sure is found in Christ Jesus – remember that *you* are baptized.

Through our baptism we have been given the assurance of our salvation, we have been given a home in the Body of Christ, and we have been given the mission *and* the power to do God's work in the world. Let's *remember* that baptism – and go out and act like it.