

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on January 10, 2021.

## RENEWING OUR BAPTISM

***In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Mark 1:9***

One of my favorite Sundays at Clarence over the last fifteen years is the Sunday when we remember the Baptism of Jesus. On this Sunday, the Sanctuary has been decorated to represent various themes of water. We would have three stations set up that represent different meanings of baptism. In past years, the congregation was invited to come forward to renew their baptism in some symbolic way.

This year we cannot do this. This is the year when we will renew our baptismal covenant at home through words. Our usual celebration of the Baptism of Jesus grew out of two graduate programs. When Debbie Katz served as our Christian Educator over 15 years ago, she was working on masters at Union Seminary in Richmond. She needed to do a project that shaped some part of worship.

I had just completed the thesis that was the final requirement in my Doctor of Ministry work. My thesis focused on the meaning and practice of baptism in the Christian church. I was excited to work with Debbie to design a worship service that would teach the meanings of baptism.

My Doctor of Ministry work had a profound effect on my approach to faith. For much of my life I understood Christianity to be primarily a set of ideas and stories about God. I now believe Christianity is more about discipleship than scholarship. I have become convinced that our faith is shaped more by what we do, rather than what we think. It is our common practices that shape our relationship with God more than abstract teaching. In my course of research, I surprisingly came upon the words of a Pope that profoundly reflect the core of this truth.

In 1939 Pius XI wrote:

**People are instructed in the truths of faith and brought to appreciate the inner joys of religions far more effectually by the annual celebration of our sacred mysteries than by any pronouncements of the teaching of the Church. Such pronouncements usually reach only a few and the more learned among the faithful; feasts reach them all. The former speaks but once, the latter speak every year – in fact forever. The church's teaching affects the mind primarily; her feasts affect both mind and heart, and have a salutary effect upon the whole of man's nature.**

We have just experienced an example of this truth. If there is one part of the story of Jesus that our children know well it is his incarnation. This is not because they have just heard the story of Jesus' nativity in Sunday school. Their knowledge comes from all the practices that surround a usual Christmas Season. This year they missed out on so many usual practices - Christmas pageant, Christmas Carols, lighting the advent wreath, and worshipping by candlelight on Christmas Eve.

All these practices not only re-enforce the story of Christmas; they often help us experience the truth of God with us at a deep emotional level.

The situation is similar when we begin to focus on the sacraments of the church. We can only use words to poke at and toy with these mysteries. Baptism and the Lord's Supper through signs, symbols and actions speak to us of God's grace at levels that are almost too deep for words.

This morning I would like us to focus on the meanings of baptism. I say meanings because baptism has many meanings. The Sacrament of Baptism reminds us of several ways that God's grace can be at work in our lives. I would like us to focus on three of the meanings that the sacrament of water and spirit brings to us.

One meaning of baptism is giving ourselves to God. Baptism is a public sign that we have committed ourselves to Jesus. Since at least the third century, the church has baptized in two ways. One way has been to baptize infants. This is still most common today. When a child is baptized it is his or her parents who make a commitment. They commit themselves to raise the child in the faith. This act of baptism is not complete until confirmation. Confirmation developed as a result of infant baptism. It is a time when individuals who have been baptized as infants confirm their baptism by declaring their own decision to accept Jesus as Lord.

When an adult is baptized the decision for grace is clear. The person stands before the congregation and answers the questions of faith for themselves. They are saying yes to Jesus. They stand before the congregation in the same way Jesus stood before John and commit themselves to God.

At various times in our lives we are presented with choices. We must decide either for God's will or against God's purpose for our lives. In baptism we commit ourselves to follow Jesus. There are many ways we come to say yes to Jesus. Some people experience dramatic emotional experiences of God's grace, while others slowly come to realize their need for the love that God can give.

Listen to this song called *I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me*, that reflects a renewed commitment to God.

A second meaning of baptism is the experience of forgiveness. Human beings through most of history have had a real sense of guilt or failure. In many religions there have been ritual cleansings. One of the uses of water is washing. Water washes away the dirt of living.

After Nathan the prophet confronted David about his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, David was overcome with remorse. The guilt was hard for him to carry. So, David turned to God and said:

**Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love;  
According to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
And cleanse me from my sin!**

At various times in our lives we feel like David.

There are times when we have failed a loved one,  
or hurt a co-worker

our failed to follow God's call.

Each one of us has experienced a time when we want to be forgiven and to be given a new chance. At these times remember the waters of baptism can cleanse our souls.

There is a very interesting baptismal font at Belmont Abby College in North Carolina. It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font. On that very stone, a little over a hundred years ago, black slaves stood to be sold to the highest bidder. Today, the stone serves Belmont Abby as its baptismal font. An inscription on the font tells all: "On this stone men were sold into slavery. From this stone men are now baptized into freedom."

In our baptism God washes away our imperfections and gives us a new beginning. The water gives us a new beginning. Listen for the words of the next song, *Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters* that reminds us of the showers of grace that come from Christ.

A third meaning of baptism is as spiritual refreshment. Most living things need water to grow and thrive.

You many recall the woman that Jesus met at the well. She was drawing water for the use of her family. Jesus talks to her of living water. Jesus said to her **Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of this water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.**

Jesus is speaking of his presence and love that feeds our very souls. Jeremiah tells us that human beings are like cisterns that have a crack in them. These cisterns cannot hold water. No matter how much water is poured in them they will never be full. Jeremiah is telling us that human beings are the same. No matter how much we have, no matter how many experiences we enjoy, no matter how much power we obtain, no matter our position in society, we will never be fully whole. There is at the very core of the human spirit a need for the love of God. This thirst at the center of our being can only be quenched by the presence of God.

Jesus offers us his very self. The water of baptism reminds us of our need for prayer and worship and scripture that help to mediate God's presence to us. A mere belief in God is not enough – we need the active presence of his love in the heart of our being. We need to open our minds and hearts to his coming.

Our singers invite us to come and be refreshed by God's grace in the song *All Who Thirst Come Now to the Water*.

Now we come to the part of this service where we can respond to God's grace. Some of us today come having taken our faith in Jesus for granted. We have been part of the Christian Church for years. Yet the importance of our commitment has diminished.

Others of us come today with some burden that weighs on our hearts. We remember some way that we have failed God or others in the past and we still feel that guilt.

Others come to worship today as you have regularly come in the past, yet God may not seem real to you. There is a sense of dryness in your life. God may seem so remote. You desire to know Christ more fully.

Friends in Christ, whatever our journey to this point we remember that in baptism God claims us and seals us to show that we belong to Jesus Christ; God forgives us and frees us from sin and death; God unites us to Jesus in his death and resurrection; makes us members of the church, the body of Christ; and empowers us by the Spirit to join Christ's mission in the world. We have come now before God and the church to profess our faith in Christ.

Let us answer again these questions-

Do you believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?

**I do.**

Do you acknowledge that you are a sinner, forgiven only through the death and resurrection of Christ on your behalf?

**I do.**

Do you, relying on the grace of God, promise to confess Christ publicly before others, to serve Christ daily, and to walk in Jesus' way?

**I do.**

Do you promise to exhibit the joy of new life in Christ; to share fully in the life of the church; to be faithful in worship and service; and to offer your prayers and gifts?

**I do.**

Let us pray: Eternal and gracious God, we give you thanks. In countless ways you have revealed yourself in ages past and have blessed us with signs of your grace. We praise you that through the waters of the sea you led your people Israel out of bondage, into freedom in the land of your promise. We praise you for sending Jesus your Son, who for us was baptized in the waters of the Jordan and was anointed as the Christ by your Holy Spirit. Through the baptism of his death and resurrection you set us free from the bondage of sin and death and give us cleansing and rebirth. We praise you for your Holy Spirit, who teaches us and leads us into all truth, filling us with a variety of gifts, that we might proclaim the gospel to all nations and serve you as a royal priesthood. We rejoice that you claimed us in our baptism, and that by your grace we are born anew. By your Holy Spirit renew us, that we may be empowered to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

So, friends, remember your baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.