



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“REFLECTIONS ON BAPTISM”

Scripture Lesson: Romans 6:2B - 11

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Dr. D. Donald Day on Sunday, May 25, 2008.

We just celebrated a wonderful occasion, the baptism of three children, three cousins. And we all know that baptisms are very important but what makes splashing some water on the foreheads of babies and using that Trinitarian formula in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit so special? If we are going to deal with this we are going to need to begin with Jesus and his command to baptize believers. “Go therefore make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This is the Great Commission which is stated in the 28 chapter of the book of Matthew. If we are looking for a reason to baptize, we really don’t need to look any further. If Jesus has instituted this sacrament and commanded us to do it this should be all the legitimation we need for practicing baptism. Thus in answer to the question of why we baptize, why we just baptized Henry, Liles and Taylor is very simple, very direct: we baptize because Jesus commanded us to do so.

Of course this observation is only beginning of our reflections on baptism we still need to determine God’s purpose for baptizing. This purpose is probably quite familiar to you. One way of describing the purpose of baptism is that as I stated during the baptisms, we become members of God’s church through baptism. Yet it must be added that in a sense (now listen to this carefully) as we become part of Christ’s church we also receive salvation. Thus in his letter to Titus Paul writes, “God saved us not because of deed done by us in righteousness but in virtue of his own mercy by the washing of regeneration.” Now I said to listen carefully because there is a clarification I need to make. It is not in any shape or form that the actual baptism is the cause of our salvation. Rather we all know that our salvation is brought about by the work of Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. In a sense, baptism is the seal of our salvation, yet it is more than just a symbol. It’s a kind of telegram. Now obviously I am using an old analogy here, I don’t think they even send telegrams any more. Maybe it is rather like an e-mail. It’s as if a rich long lost uncle died and left me a fortune. This inheritance really does me no good if I know nothing about it. I need something like a telegram or an e-mail to inform me about this fortune from my long lost uncle. Of course the e-mail bringing the news of my inheritance is more than just a symbol of this new found fortune. In a very real sense it is more like a sign which actually brings me the fortune and makes me rich. Yet ultimately the e-mail is not the cause of my inheritance. The cause is the death and loving intention of my uncle which actually causes my good fortune to come about. Now this is how we understand baptism in relation to the atoning work of Christ. Baptism is really the e-mail or telegram that informs us of God’s love for us. In baptism it is proclaimed to all of us here, to all Christians of all times that God loves Henry and Liles and Taylor and God loves us too. Thus today, on the occasion of their baptisms God is telling us of love. Yet as with my uncle’s telegram or e-mail, through the administration of these baptisms, God is also giving his love to Taylor and to Liles and to Henry.

Well now this brings us to the particular question of why God would want us to baptize these children at their very young age. Why do some segments of the Christian church practice infant

baptism and others not? Those parts of the church that, like Presbyterians, do practice infant baptism have typically pointed to Jesus' remark, "Let the little children come unto me, do not hinder them for such belongs the kingdom of God." That is found, or versions of it, in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Perhaps the best argument for infant baptism is to cite the church's historic practice of baptizing infants one would certainly not expect God to have allowed an incorrect practice to persist for so many centuries. Nevertheless there is one more consideration which I believe mandates the baptism of infants. It is a practice which unambiguously affirms that God is the author of our salvation. Recall my notion of baptism as God's message to us about our salvation. Salvation and God's love cannot be earned; they are entirely God's gift. There are no preconditions and no requirements necessary in order for us to receive God's love. In this respect, all of us are completely helpless, all of us are fully dependent on God's mercy. What could be more completely helpless than a little baby, so completely dependent on everything and everyone. That's precisely the point of infant baptism. As we sat in our pews this morning and as we watched these three baptisms we were reminded when it comes to obtaining salvation we are just as helpless as Henry, Liles and Taylor. These children will grow up and will be reminded of their salvation, they'll be reminded of their baptism. And when their parents tell them of their baptisms they'll say that before any of you could really talk, before you could think or understand, the three of you received God's love and promise of salvation. It is the same for each one of us. Of course, it is not the case that those of us baptized later in life lost out on this, yet the reason that many segments of the church encourage the baptism of children is to emphasize to all of us that salvation is totally the work of God and it is not our work.

Maybe it would be helpful to summarize what we've said so far. We've seen that in baptism we receive the message of our baptism. Also we come to understand that the baptism of infants serves to underline the fact that this salvation we receive is totally God's work and there is nothing we can do to earn it. However there is one more thing about baptism that we need to consider if we are going to understand it properly. Quite honestly, what I want to talk now is something I am afraid most Christians do not fully appreciate. You see, usually when we think about baptism, we tend to think of it as a once and done event. And in some ways that's true, one we are baptized we never need to be baptized again, but did you know that your entire life as a Christian is really one long baptism. That we live our whole lives under the sign of baptism. Let me reread these words from the sixth chapter of Romans that I read earlier:

- 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
- 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
- 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.
- 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.
- 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin.
- 8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.
- 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.
- 10 The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.
- 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Through baptism, we died to sin and we are now fully alive in Jesus Christ. Henry and Liles and Taylor are fully alive in Jesus Christ, in fact there is a certain symbolism in the baptism service

that some Christian traditions practice. In the Orthodox traditions, the baptismal font is big enough that the child, the naked child, is actually placed in the font, to symbolize the death to sin and the rising to new life in Christ. Our font is not big enough to place even the smallest infant in it, and it might sound odd to think about an innocent little baby being sinful. After all, what did any of those three angelic little beings do to be called sinful? Yet if we remember that sin can also be understood as selfishness, as the concern with oneself to the exclusion of everyone else, then we have to admit even little babies are tinged with sin. This is the deeper truth we find in the Genesis story that all of us, every one of us, has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I do like to point out people that all it takes to be fully convinced of original sin is to raise a two year old. But if it is true that even a baby is stained with selfishness and sin, than that sinful part of him or herself must be put to death. And as we said, this is what happens to us when we are immersed figuratively or literally in the baptismal waters. That in us which is sinful died. This happened because we were linked to Christ's death on the cross and joined in his body. The old being that in us was marred with sin is now dead. Subsequently, though, when we're withdrawn from the water, figuratively or literally we are now symbolizing our resurrection into new life we share with Jesus Christ. God's word works through those baptismal waters, had drowned us and killed our old sinful selves.

Now we are new people, we are people whose new identity has been shaped by our membership in Christ's body. Our baptism has really brought about our initiation in to this body and as such we are people who are dead to sin, who share all that belongs to Christ. We share his righteousness, his salvation, his creative activities and all the members of the body belong to each other. So our baptisms have made us people who have the promise of salvation, people who share in God's creative projects and people who belong to one another. This is our identity, we belong to one another. The real me is the person who identifies with God's work, who sacrifices himself or dies to sin on behalf of the neighbor who is linked to me. I can't be myself without my neighbor. Thus I can't be myself if yield to sin and put my own needs above my neighbors. The real me is a person who sacrifices himself, who dies to sin on behalf of his neighbor for the sake of Christ. Baptism thus provides us with a kind of Christ like identity.

Now I need to make some clarifications as of this point. Important distinctions must be made at this point between Christ and the new identity given us in baptism. Unlike Christ our dying to sin in our neighbor's service does not bring about our neighbor's salvation and it also must be pointed out that unlike Christ even though we have died to sin in baptism, even though our old sinful selves have been drowned, there is no doubt that all of us are still sinners. It might be a shock but there are no perfect people sitting in this sanctuary. At least, I don't know any and that certainly includes myself. Now does that mean our baptisms did not work? No. Does that mean we all need to go back to the baptismal font and do it again properly? No. That is not the problem at all. Baptism, you see, is only the beginning. In the event of baptism we receive the promise that our sinful side will be beaten back, yet it is still the case that sin remains on this side of death -- there is no such thing as perfection. Thus our baptisms simply begin a lifelong process of dying to our sinful selves so that we can truly share in God's creative projects. The new self-sacrificing identity that we have been given in baptism is, well, it's a bit like musical or athletic ability. Our identity, if we are blessed with a great musical ability or a great athletic ability (I'm blessed with neither) is defined by these abilities and they can never be taken away from those who have them, but they are not fully developed apart from practice. As musicians require a great deal of practice to fulfill their musical promise, Christians practice denying themselves on behalf of their neighbor to fulfill the promise of their baptism. It is in this sense that our whole lives should be a living out of our baptism. It is in this sense that we are called out to renew our baptismal vows and we should do that every time we witness a baptism. Renew our own vows. Yet this renewal should never be seen as a burden, it is a joy for those who have been baptized.

Martin Luther is to have commented many times that on the days he felt the lowest and furthest from God he would repeat over and over again, "I have been baptized, I have been baptized." We Christians can find joy serving our neighbor because Christ's new life is in our blood. Perhaps now you can see why baptism is so important not just to the Fordney families whose children were baptized today; with our baptisms we are all asked questions that we'll spend the rest of our lives trying to answer. Will you allow your sinful self to be drowned? Will you allow yourself to be denying itself daily for Christ sake on behalf of your neighbor? We believe as Presbyterians that baptism should come at the beginning of life because it sets the tone for the rest of life. It is something we need to renew, a questions we need to answer again and again. Now of course, one more consideration must be added. The question posed by our baptism ultimately already has an answer and that answer is the love of God. God's overwhelming love is for us. That is what makes baptism so important, it puts a mark on us as it were, it makes us self sacrificing people loved by God even if we fall down and fail to put it into practice everyday that we live. Baptism makes us persons like Taylor, and Liles and Henry, who will live in that love every day of our lives. Go and do likewise my friends.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.