



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “OUR SPIRITUAL ADOPTION”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 21:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 7, 2018  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

### Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

### The Baptism of Jesus

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People:** *Thanks be to God.*

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Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that last year we celebrated 29 baptisms in the life of our church family? That's about one baptism every couple of weeks. In fact, we celebrate the sacrament with such frequency that many of you could probably recite some of the liturgy yourself.

But that's not unusual seeing as, even in the early and formative years of the Church, we would have very likely heard some variation of at least some of the words that we speak today. Words like: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We refer to that phrase as the "Trinitarian formula" -- and that formula, along with the element of water - they have nearly always accompanied the sacrament of Baptism.

Last week I had the opportunity to sit down with Scott and Allison in advance of their son Jack's baptism this morning. I remember saying something to the effect that, with Ellie having been

baptized not so long ago, we might not need to review the theology of the sacrament, to which Scott said: "Yes, I think that would be good for us to do."

If the truth be known, it is good for all of us to go over it again from time to time, especially on this Sunday in particular, a day when the greater Church asks us to prayerfully consider the sacrament of Jesus, the Baptism of Jesus, that is, the sacrament that He has given to the Church.

And so, once again, on this day, we consider this sacrament; we ponder certain questions. Questions like: What is really going on when a person is baptized? Why do we celebrate this strange and ancient ritual? Why was the only sinless person ever to walk the face of the earth baptized...and why are we baptized?

Well, the answer to that last question has to do with the fact that that one sinless person that actually walked the face of this earth told us that we needed to be baptized...and that we needed to baptize others as well- young and old alike - as many as the Lord would see fit to call.

In Matthew 28, Jesus says: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." As we might expect, there are a variety of ways to honor that Biblical mandate, to celebrate the sacrament of baptism. For example, it would not be surprising if we took time to visit the various communities of faith around peninsular Charleston to come across some people who were baptized as infants and others who were baptized as adults, some people who were fully immersed in water and others who had water placed simply on the tops of their heads.

And I, for one, believe that it is good when sister churches can affirm baptism however it is rightly practiced; whether it is for a believer who comes by their own profession of faith or an infant who is presented based upon the faith of his or her parents as well as, of course, God's covenantal love, indeed, that divine love is really what makes the difference!

You see, it is not about the preacher, or the location; it is not about the abundance of water or the lack thereof. No! It's about God, and what God does once, God does once and for all, for as it says in the third chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus: "there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

Now, in ancient times, there was obviously not the sacrament of baptism as we know it today, but there was a particular Old Testament covenantal parallel and it served as one of the primary means by which God's people identified themselves as children of God...and it was called circumcision.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, we see Abraham making sure that his son Isaac was circumcised when he was eight days old. In doing so, Abraham was not only doing what God had told him to do, but he was also signifying to the whole world that Isaac was not his child - he wasn't Sarah's child either.

Oh, he was their child in a biological sense; but, in a theological sense, Isaac had been adopted by God's grace. In other words, Isaac was a child of God; and it was through that ancient rite of circumcision that Isaac was marked as God's child and further engrafted into God's covenantal community.

It is that very covenantal framework which has contributed to those of us within the reformed tradition affirming the baptism of infants, for we too bring our children to the waters of baptism – maybe not when they are eight days old, but certainly when they are young. And we do this in order to set them apart as children of God...but we are also making another singularly and significant bold affirmation, and it is this... that God's love claims us long before we can respond in faith.

In this way, we are recognizing God's grace, because none of us are saved by our pedigree or our righteousness or by any gift or skill we possess. We are saved not by our works, not even by our baptism. The same can be said of Abraham whose faith we are told was reckoned unto him as righteousness.

Ah, when it comes to infants, they can't understand this kind of grace, can they? Truth be known, we can't recognize that need for forgiveness ourselves; and if we are not careful, we can lose sight of that. I seriously doubt that any of us looked at Jack this morning and said to ourselves, "Boy, Jack is in serious need of forgiveness." And why would we? After all, Jack looks so cute and innocent, so fresh and full of life! But friends, baptism is serious business, and we must never forget that everyone in the human race, including our children, have to deal with sin.

Mark Twain, who wasn't especially noted for his piety, once made the comment that the doctrine of original sin was the single most verifiable doctrine of the whole of the Christian religion. What Mark Twain was saying is that we are all sinners. The prophet Isaiah puts it like this: "none are righteous, no not one; we all like sheep have gone astray."

The reality is that all of us are so caught up in the condition that the Bible calls sin that only God has the capacity to cleanse us from it, which raises a very important question. If one of the basic aspects of baptism has to do with sin and our need to be forgiven, then why was Jesus baptized?

That's a good question, and I think it is one that the Gospel writers grappled with as well. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, John the baptizer and Jesus engage in a sort of theological discussion about baptism when John says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

In Luke's Gospel, a mere two verses manage to encapsulate this whole episode. And in John's Gospel, there's not even any mention of Jesus standing in the water. In fact, there's no mention of water at all.

The Gospel writers are in harmony, however, in that Jesus' baptism actually happened, but it's almost as if the writers were somewhat uncomfortable imagining that Jesus would present himself squarely in the cleansing waters of baptism.

Mark, on the other hand, he takes a somewhat different approach. We read this morning from chapter 1, beginning with verse 9: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the River Jordan." In the Gospel according to Mark, it could not be more clear that Jesus gets baptized in the muddy waters of the River Jordan, and, when this happens, Jesus manages to make a very important point regarding the incredible problem of sin in our lives.

It is the same point that Jesus made when the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. You see, Jesus is not going to sit back in some heavenly kingdom and shout down to us how we can best deal with the problem of sin. Not on your life, or mine! No! Jesus is Emanuel, God with us, and Jesus is going to share in our humanity as much as a person without sin possibly can.

Think of it this way, when has Jesus ever asked us to do anything that he wasn't willing to do himself? Whether he tells us to love God, or love our neighbor, or carry our cross, or to be baptized...he has already set forth an example. To put it another way, Jesus wasn't baptized because he had to be baptized. Jesus was baptized because he chose to be baptized!

I recall a story that a friend and colleague the Rev. Dr. Todd Jones once shared. Todd's brother Luther and his wife were unable to have children of their own and so they waited six long years to adopt a child through the Pittsburg Home for Children. Brice was a great gift, but three years later, after they had reconciled that Brice would be the only child they would ever have, they received a call from that same Pittsburg Home for Children. A little girl had been born into the world by a teenage mother, and the family that was lined up to adopt her backed out at the last minute because of what seemed to be some serious issues with seizures. The home asked if Luther and his wife would adopt her, and they needed an answer in 24 hours.

They prayed and they struggled. They called as many people as they could in that short amount of time to gauge just how serious this problem would be, what kind of changes would they have to make to their family? They decided "Yes, we would like to welcome her as our own," and Chrissy has been a blessing to them as well.

Some years after the adoption, Todd was able to spend some extended time with her. It just so happened that the connection was made between the two of them as they were in the hospital waiting for Todd's mother to die of cancer. Chrissy turned to her father Luther and said, "Do you think Uncle Todd would be willing to play hangman with me?" And so Todd said, "Yes." They began to play as Luther served as a mediator.

She started with a word that Todd didn't get. It was eight letters long and Todd was completely hung! She told him what the word was. The word was adoption. She said to him when his brother was gone, "You know, Uncle Todd, I'm adopted. That means that my mommy and daddy really wanted me." Is that not how we all come into a relationship with God? We come into it as Chrissy did, by way of adoption.

Jesus himself understood adoption...understood it more that we may realize. After all, Jesus was not the flesh and blood of Joseph, yet Joseph never once ceased to be Jesus' earthly father.

What's more, we should keep in mind that the line and lineage of King David from which the Messiah was to be born, it came not through Mary's family tree, but rather Joseph's. And yet, it nevertheless came to pass that Jesus was that rightful heir to the throne of his ancestor David...and biology had nothing to do with it.

At the end of the day, we don't need a royal bloodline to experience God's love. It doesn't matter who we are or where we come from, because Jesus has made it abundantly clear that he wants us – he loves us!

Friends, we are here this morning because of the grace of God, and God wants to be in a relationship with us; and one of the primary ways by which God's love for us and our love for God is made real in our life and in our life lived together, is in the waters of baptism, for in those waters we claim that amazing love which first claimed us, and we also affirm loud and clear that we do not belong to ourselves but to the One who lived and died and rose again so that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Let us pray...

Loving God, we thank you for your eternal promises that are revealed to us in the waters of baptism, and we ask that you would help us to live up to those promises each and every day. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.