



Sermon of April 18, 1999



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"LIKE NONE OTHER"

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Luke 24:13-35

The epistle lesson read to us this morning is evidence of the importance of baptism in the early Church. It was Jesus' command to his disciples, "Go into all of the world, and baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The lesson read to you reveals that that is what they did, right from the beginning.

What we heard this morning is the record of the first class of baptizands. They were there in Jerusalem, at the Jewish feast of the Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon the disciples, empowering the disciples to preach the good news of what God had done in Jesus Christ, in words that all people could understand.

That is what Peter did. He went out into the street and started preaching. At the end of the

sermon, the crowd gathered there asked, "What shall we do now?" Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand were added."

Now that is a "preacher's count," I can tell you that. When ushers count the crowd, you always get an exact number. When preachers count, they always round to the nearest thousand. A "preacher's count" always begins, "About..." "About three thousand were added."

From the beginning it has been the same. All Christians were baptized by water and the Spirit: by water for the forgiveness of sins, by the passing of the Spirit through the laying on of hands. The blessing of the Spirit from one Christian passed to another.

Even children, which gets us into controversy. You can divide Christians into two camps: those who believe that children should be baptized, and those who do not. Methodists are among those who do. Baptists, for instance, are among those who don't. They are called Baptists now, but their original name was Anabaptist, which means, "baptized again," or "rebaptize." They believed that the example of the New Testament is the authoritative example, and that example is almost always the baptism of adults who can renounce their sins and pledge their allegiance to Christ. So the Anabaptists rebaptized adults who had been baptized as infants, implying that the second baptism is the one that will stick.

In small towns in this country, especially in the south, there were a whole lot of Baptists and Methodists living in the same towns, side by side. They often were at war with each other. Those days are pretty much gone, we don't fight about baptism anymore. We find other things to fight about. In the past it was baptism. If hostilities should break out again, the Methodists could mobilize a whole lot of allies, because the great majority of Christians from the very beginning have believed in baptizing infants and children.

If that is true, then what do you do with a passage such as ours this morning, that links repentance with baptism? You can't repent if you are a baby. What's more, you don't need to. You don't need to repent until you have sinned, and the Church has said that can't happen until you are old enough to take responsibility for your own actions.

Traditionally that has been called the age of discretion, set at the time of adolescence. Which is why churches that baptize infants and children also have a rite of confirmation at adolescence, at which time the individual then renounces their sin and pledges their allegiance to Christ. Until then, until they reach that age when they make their own decisions in this life, we believe that it doesn't make sense to call children sinners, because they are dependent on adults. Their state is officially called "innocence."

You may question that. I remember an old story about a man driving with his children on a vacation, who said that after the first day in the car together, he believed in "original sin." After the second day, he believed in "total depravity."

But in our more reasonable moments, we question whether children need to repent of sin. But the Church still baptized them, always has, right from the beginning. Even the New Testament hints at that. It says that adults "and their households" were baptized at the same time.

By the second century we do know that children were baptized. And we know why. The Church believed that when they performed a baptism, it was like a covenant. It was not just something we did, they believed that God was doing something as well. God was saying something about who we are as human beings, and what our relationship to God is.

The best way that I know how to describe it is to say that sometimes our baptism is like Jesus' baptism. That is to say, sometimes the heavens open, and the Spirit descends upon us, and a voice says, "This is my daughter, my son, in whom I delight." He says that to everybody.

Maybe that is why Jesus commanded us to go out into the world and baptize everybody. Not only for the repentance of sin, but also because it is a time of adoption, a time of entering a covenant with God. Jesus did not go to John the Baptist for baptism because of his sin. He was sinless. He was without sin. But he went anyway, undoubtedly led there by the Spirit, so that God could use what John was doing to confirm for Jesus who he is. "You are my Son in whom I delight."

Jesus' whole ministry was to go to people, especially to those who felt that they weren't worth very much, weren't treated very well in this world, and perhaps their self worth was the result of the way the world treated them. He went to them, and said, "You are a child of God." The Church baptized children because they wanted to say that to all children.

Now it may take a while for them to realize that. But in baptism we are saying, whether you realize it or not, or whether you believe this or not, like Jesus in his baptism, in your baptism God is saying, "You are my child."

But the second thing to be said is there is always a thread of sadness in every baptism. We can celebrate what God has done in entering a covenant of love with us, but there is always the thread of sadness because we know that although God chooses us and loves us, we can leave God.

The Bible is amazing. You can see yourself in the stories in the Bible. In fact, that is why we say the Bible is inspired by God, because the stories in the Bible are the stories of our life. You can read the human story in the stories in the Bible. Like the story of the Exodus, which is perhaps the most universal story ever told. It is the story of the Jews leaving bondage in Egypt and journeying for forty years through the desert to a promised land. That is the story of every human life. Every human life wants to move from where we are to where we want to be, or to a promised land. The way to get there is through an exodus, through a time of discipline, and perhaps even suffering.

It is the story of immigration. Unfortunately in our time people are immigrants by the hundreds of thousands without their will. But it is also the story of the 20th century that millions of people are immigrants because they seek a better life. They go from a kind of bondage where they are to a promised land, where they want to be.

Or, it is the story of personal fulfillment. If you want a better life than the life that you have now, the way to get there is through a journey that might require of you sacrifice, deprivation, and perhaps even great suffering. But that is the way you reach promised lands. Israel has taught us

that.

Israel taught us not only about the human journey to a promised land, but Israel has also taught us about that journey from a far country, back home. Being loved, then rejecting that love, or forgetting how much we have been loved. Traveling to a far country, living a life that you know you are not to live, or that you don't want to live, but you can't do anything about. And then discovering a love that will not let you go, a love that brought you safe thus far, and a love that will lead you home.

That story is told over and over again in the Bible. Most familiar to us is the Prodigal Son. But earlier, and most eloquently, by the prophet Hosea. Some of the most beautiful words of scripture are in this passage. And it is most appropriate as we talk about the baptism of children. Listen to this.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me.

Which is to say, in spite of being chosen and loved by God, Israel went its own way, did not live the life that God wanted it to live. But God remained faithful in spite of Israel's disobedience.

Then these beautiful words.

I taught Ephraim to walk, I took Israel in my arms; I took care of them while they were sick and I healed them. [That's a mother talking.] I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!

That is why I say at baptism there is a celebration, because God has entered into a covenant with us. But there is also a thread of sadness, because we know that we can leave God, pay no attention to God's love. In fact, because of human nature being what it is, we probably will, all of us. When we grow old, like Israel, we will worship other gods. But what we are doing in baptism is affirming our faith, that although we might forget God, God will never forget us. He says to us, what he said to Israel, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim!"

That brings us back to the scripture read to us this morning, Peter at Pentecost, baptizing adults for the repentance of sin. Baptism is a covenant promising that God will always love you, and you can always come home. We are saying to these children, and to infants, we are saying what parents say to their children. When you grow up, and leave home, remember this. You are always loved. It is what God said to Israel, "How can I ever give you up!"

If we could remember that, if we could remember our baptism, that it is a covenant, a covenant God has given to us, a promise that God has given that he will always love us, then I think we would live better lives. In fact, if the whole world were baptized, the world would be better. Maybe that is why Jesus said, "Go out into the whole world and baptize everybody." Because baptism affirms something about each one of us, the uniqueness of each one of us, the

preciousness, and the dignity, of each one of us, because we are children of God. That information about your life, if you can remember it, can change your life.

I have found something of what it means in the poem by E. B. de Vito, which was printed as the "Words of Meditation" for this morning.

When I was young, I did not know
the roles I learned and thought my own
need never have been played at all.

I did not know that there were tribes
like the Zulus who assured their daughters:
you are unique and beautiful
so each walked tall; each was spared
from ever sitting in the cinders
diminished by a sister's grace
or shadowed by her radiant face.

I tell myself, go back, go back
and face the same old vista, track
yet play a new role in a way
I never dreamed that I might play:

bold, brave, unshakable aware
invincible, bright, light as air
and like none other anywhere.

That's an uncommon source for describing what baptism is about. But it is there. At least it comes close to what God is trying to tell each one of us. God is trying to get you to live your life in a way you never dreamed possible:

bold, brave, unshakable aware
invincible, bright, light as air
and like none other anywhere.

And it begins by remembering your baptism.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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