

Sermon for Zion, June 24, 2018 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 255 – Now, let the vault of heaven; 553 – May the Lord Bless You;
To The River; 651 – Guide me, O thou great Redeemer

Scripture: Acts 2:38-47; Responsive Reading: Living Faith 7.6 (selections)

Sermon Title: “*Remember your baptism and give thanks.*”

Acts 2:38-41

Peter said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Earlier in the service, we celebrated the baptism of little Cian Michael Lloyd O’Reilly. In doing so, we tied Cian - and his family - and ourselves - to all who have stood at the font, or the river, or the sea, in this land and others, in our day and before, and in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, were baptized into the faith. Were welcomed into the family. Were received into the Holy Catholic Church. Not just received into Zion – received into the Church, Holy and Catholic, which means the great congregation of faith which stretches around the world – Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and more - and stretches all the way back to that moment when Jesus entered the river with John; all the way back to our reading from earlier, where three thousand were added in a single day. Baptism is and always has been the Church’s way of saying Welcome. And today, all the way from London, it was Cian who was welcomed by us.

When the Bible talks about Baptism, though, it hearkens back to an even earlier time – it recalls the very beginning of all things, when the Holy Spirit moved upon the formless waters of the deep, and life sprang forth. It recalls the Great Flood and the shelter of the Ark, as life was preserved in the face of chaos. It recalls Moses, leading the Hebrew nation through the parted waters of the Red Sea, their feet secure on dry ground. It speaks of the priests, preparing to serve in the Temple, who underwent a ritual washing, to enter the Holy Place in purity. It speaks of a story we barely know, of the Assyrian commander Naaman, who enters the waters with a deadly disease, and emerges healed.

The New Testament marks the startling emergence of John the Baptist, preaching repentance and new life. Baptism was the sign of cleansing from sin, of turning from the old ways to new, of dedicating one’s life to God. You emerged from

the river a new person. Jesus, “*to fulfill all righteousness,*” it says, is himself baptized by John. As Jesus rises from the water, the Holy Spirit appears, descends, and the voice comes from heaven: “*This is my beloved Son.*” Jesus’ identity is confirmed at his baptism.

Jesus and his disciples, we are told, carry on the Baptism ministry of John, continuing to call people to repentance and new life. When John is imprisoned and eventually killed, baptism does not die with him; instead, it becomes the sign of the new community of faith called the Church. Jesus’ final instruction to his disciples was to “*Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*” Peter takes Jesus at his word, when, as we heard in our reading, 3000 were baptized in a single day. From the time of Abraham, circumcision was the sign of belonging with the Covenant People of God. Now, says the Apostle Paul, Baptism is the new sign, the new welcome, the one we all share together (Colossians 2:11–12).

So with all that background, what is actually going on when a person comes for Baptism, or when a child of believing parents is brought?

First of all, in addition to a Welcome, Baptism is a moment of thankfulness. The person coming for Baptism says, “Thank you, Father God, for the gift of life and your love for me. In gratitude and thanksgiving, I dedicate my life to you, and am marked as a follower of Jesus, my Saviour and Lord.” Parents bringing children for Baptism say, “Thank you, Father God, for the gift of this child and your love for them. In gratitude and thanksgiving, we will raise this child within the fellowship of the church, that our child too will come to know your love and embrace the faith we share.” Baptism is a time of thanksgiving, and our response to God’s great gift of life and love.

Secondly, Baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is a physical manifestation of a spiritual truth; a representation in a form we can see and touch of a greater reality, no less real, but more difficult for us to apprehend.

In language more plain, think of a policeman’s badge. It is just a piece of metal, but when the policeman presents it to you, it represents the entire Justice System of our city, province and land. In and of itself the badge is just a thing; what it represents, however, is a far greater authority and power.

Or think of a wedding ring. In and of itself, it is just a piece of gold; often, a pretty plain piece of gold. But it represents the vows of commitment between a husband and wife, and their shared life together. The value of a wedding ring goes far

beyond its weight in gold; for many, because of what it symbolises, their wedding ring is the one possession from which they would never willingly part.

Now think of Baptism. The water is a symbol of life, from the moment of Creation forward. It is a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit, bringing new life from God. It is a symbol of salvation, of deliverance from sin, of freedom and new life in Christ. It is a symbol of washing, of cleansing, and the continual forgiveness we seek and find as we strive to live as we were made to live, in hope, in peace, in joy, in love. It is a symbol of welcome, of belonging, as we do that which all have done who have taken the name of Christ. These concepts are difficult to grasp; but through the gift of the Sacrament, through the very tangible water, we begin to understand. We are called to remember. We are His.

Baptism is a welcome. Baptism is a thanksgiving. Baptism is a sacrament. And Baptism is also a commitment. When an unbaptized adult becomes a Christian, and comes for Baptism – and all of us are called to be baptized – we commit ourselves to follow Jesus as our Saviour and our Lord. When believing parents come to celebrate the Baptism of their child, *they* commit to follow Jesus, and to raise their child in that same faith, as a child of the Covenant Community of Christ. Listen again to the vows, vows we all share as Christians, as the Brothers and Sisters of Jesus:

The Vows of Baptism

- *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God who has been faithful to us in all generations, do you turn away from sin, renounce evil and all powers of the world that rebel against God or oppose God's rule of justice and love? (which is to say, "Whose side are you on?")*
- *Do you turn to Jesus Christ and offer your life to him as Lord and Saviour? (which is to say, "Have you made a conscious and ongoing decision to be a Christian, and to live your life in response to God's call?")*
- *Do you desire, in dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit, to mature as a Christian in the Church (which means to show up on Sundays when you can),*
- *to seek the guidance of Christ as you listen for his Word (which means to structure your life and decisions according to what you learn of God through the Scriptures, through Sermon, Study and Reading),*
- *to celebrate his death and life at the table he provides (which is church language for sharing Communion together with your church family),*
- *and to engage in his mission to the world? (which means to live and act as though you believe these things, and not only when you are in church)*

- When adults come for Baptism, we ask, “*Do you promise to grow in the knowledge, love and service of our Lord Jesus Christ within the fellowship of his Church?*” Or, to believing parents of children brought for Baptism: “*Do you promise to raise this child in the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ within the fellowship of his Church?*” (which simply means, Are you going to follow through with this commitment?).

When we decide to get married, we respond to the love we have for one another by making a commitment through taking vows – “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse,” etc. When we decide to follow Christ, we respond to the love of God by making a commitment to follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and to raise our children in that faith. A couple is ready to get married when they are ready to make the commitment to love one another and stick together, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. A person is ready to be baptized when they are willing to make the commitment to follow Jesus within the fellowship of the Church. A child is ready to be baptized when their parents are willing to make the commitment to raise them in the faith which they themselves believe and live. Baptism is a commitment.

It is also a commitment we make as a church family. Baptisms are best celebrated in a service of worship, when the church family into which the baptized are welcomed is present. And as the church family, representing the wider church, we too have a vow to make. We too make a commitment. Listen again:

The Congregation’s Vow:

- *Do you, on behalf of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture this candidate for baptism and her family, by example and counsel, with love and in prayer, encouraging them to follow the way of Christ and to be faithful members of his church, as far as you are able?*

And we try to make good on that commitment through friendship, encouragement, welcome and support; through providing excellent nursery facilities, a great Sunday School, a dynamic Youth Ministry, engaging Bible Studies, and of course, meaningful and relevant Sunday worship. You’ve heard that it takes a village to raise a child; well, it takes a Church Family to raise a Christian. Don’t try to do it on your own.

Our lives as Christians don’t stop at Baptism. Baptism marks the beginning, not the end. Baptism isn’t simply a box you check off, it isn’t just a photo op, or a cultural rite of passage. Baptism is a marker, a starting point, a sign of belonging, but it isn’t the whole story. Listen, as Living Faith, our Statement of Faith as Presbyterians, puts it this way (Living Faith 7.6.3, 7.6.4):

God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life. It is a sacrament meant for those who profess their faith and for their children. Together we are the family of God.

Baptism is also an act of discipleship that requires commitment and looks towards growth in Christ. Those baptized in infancy are called in later years to make personal profession of Christ. What is born may die. What is grafted may wither. Congregations and those baptized must strive to nurture life in Christ.

Ideally, those raised in the Christian faith will come to the point of professing that faith for themselves. We call this “Confirmation;” here, it is also been called “Membership,” or “Joining the Church.” “Confirmation” is a better term, however, in that we are confirming our own intention to follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord. As we have done in the past, we will be holding Confirmation Classes again in the fall, for those young people who now wish to make Profession of Faith. It is every bit as important as Baptism itself – it is, in fact, an indivisible part of a single process.

Our Baptist brothers and sisters, among others, practice Baby Dedication and then, at a later point in a person’s life, what is called Believer’s Baptism, where baptism is done upon profession of faith. Following the example of Scripture and the tradition of our church history, we baptize adults who profess the faith but have not been baptized as infants, and we baptize the children of believing parents. What we and our Baptist friends are doing amounts to the same thing; we simply use the sacramental sign of the water at different parts of the process.

“*God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life,*” we read. Remember back to our New Testament reading, and the 3000 who were baptized that day? Well, what happened next? Did they say, “Thank goodness that’s over, now let’s get on doing what we were doing before?” Not at all. Here’s what Luke writes next (Acts 2:41-47):

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common... Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Again to use marriage as an analogy: A wedding isn't the end of a couple's commitment and life together; it is the beginning. It would be disappointing if you overheard a bride or groom say at the reception, "Thank goodness that's the last I have to see of that person." The vows of Baptism, like the vows of a wedding, mark the beginning of a new commitment, a new relationship, a new family, of a wonderful life together.

I conclude every wedding with the words, "Ladies and Gentleman, I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. So and So." Everybody cheers. In equal celebration, I make a declaration at the conclusion of every baptism, following it up by bringing the newly baptized through the congregation, as a sign of welcome into the family of the Church. I have the honour of declaring:

See what love God has given us, that we should be called the Children of God, and so we are. (Name), you are now received into the Holy Catholic Church. Through Baptism, God has made you a member of the household of God, to share with Christ in the priesthood of all believers. Remember your baptism and give thanks.

As a couple recall their wedding vows with joy, remembering that they are no longer alone, but belong to and are committed to one another, so, as Living Faith declares (7.6.5), "**Baptism assures us that we belong to God. In life and in death our greatest comfort is that we belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.**"

So, my brothers and sisters in Christ, "*Remember your baptism and give thanks.*" Remember that God gave you the gift of life. Remember that God loves you. Remember that we respond to God's love in faith, committing, in dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit, to mature as a Christian in the Church, to seek the guidance of Christ as we listen for his Word, to celebrate his death and life at the table he provides, and to engage in his mission to the world. Remember that we have committed to supporting one another in our walk of faith. And remember – remember - remember: You belong to God. In life and in death your greatest comfort is that you belong to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. "*Remember your baptism and give thanks.*" Amen.