



Sacraments and Sacred Moments:

“A GOOD BEGINNING”

(Confirmation)

Luke 18:15-17

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Several years ago, I heard the story of a father who took his three young children with him to a new church one Sunday. I’m not quite sure who told the story first, but it seems that he had them sit right up front that day. His youngest daughter, Sarah, was five and he wanted to be certain that she could see what was happening during the service. As he sat in the pew reviewing the bulletin, he noticed that there was a baptism listed in the order of worship. He was glad that he sat up front because this would be the first time that Sarah experienced a baptism in church.

When it came time for the pastor to baptize the infant, the parents brought the baby forward for the sacrament. After the baby was presented, the pastor began asking the young couple the questions of faith that are asked of all those who are baptized or their parents and sponsors. Shortly thereafter, they put their baby in the pastor’s arms to administer the sacrament.

The baby was so adorable in her christening gown. As the pastor began lifting the water from the font with her hands and placed it on the baby’s head, she said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

At about the same time, the father of three felt Sarah tugging on his sports coat sleeve. Not wanting to make too much of a scene during worship, he bent down and asked her quietly what she needed. Following her father’s quieter tone, Sarah whispered back with a quizzical look on her face, “Daddy, Daddy, why is that lady brainwashing the baby?”

Did you notice that we have six brainwashings...I mean baptisms...this morning? Upon hearing the story, I don’t know if I can view baptism the same. Just what is baptism for us? So it’s not a brainwashing, but what happens for us in this sacred moment?

The baptismal covenant begins with these words: “Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ’s holy Church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.”

As United Methodists, we baptize infants, children, youth, and adults—people of all ages—because we believe that baptism is not about what we have done but about God’s grace that is at work throughout our lives, even before we are aware of it. Wesley called this grace “prevenient grace” because it was at work drawing us to God even before we are able to recognize that God is at work in our lives. In the grace of our baptism, we acknowledge that God places a claim on our lives. This amazing love that God has for us is conveyed by a grace that will not let us go. Through the waters of our baptism, God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is at work bringing us new life, new birth.

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the Church, sometimes struggled with moments of doubt in his faith. In those times when he wondered whether God cared for him and had saved him, he would simply remember that he had been baptized.¹ In remembering his baptism, he recalled the love that God had for him so that even in his doubts, he remembered that God had washed over him in love in the waters of his baptism.

Have you ever had those experiences when you’ve wondered if God was indeed with you? From time to time in our lives, we have those moments when we wonder if somehow we are beyond God’s desire or ability to save us or even to save us from ourselves.

While we don’t believe that baptism is meant as some sort of insurance policy that rescues the baptized from some eternal punishment, baptism is the beginning of our faith journey in which we acknowledge that God claims us in love. Even before we can profess our faith and trust in God fully on our own, God is at work helping us to discover God’s grace in our lives.

While our scripture lesson this morning from Luke’s Gospel isn’t necessarily about baptism or confirmation, Jesus speaks to his disciples about God’s care for the youngest and most vulnerable among us. Perhaps there are within this story some words for us about the nature of God’s grace.

Luke tells us that the people were coming from all around and were bringing their infants to Jesus so that he “might touch them.” In Matthew and Mark’s accounts, the writers tell us that the people were bringing their “children,” but Luke very specifically mentions that “infants” were being brought to Jesus. The most vulnerable of children, tiny babies who rely entirely upon their parents to meet every need, were being brought to the feet of this man who had touched and healed so many.

Alan Culpepper mentions that in a day where infant mortality rates were “as high as 30%” and disease, war, and famine “claimed 30% of those who survived by age six and 60% by the age of sixteen,” it is no wonder that parents would want to bring their children to Jesus who had healed so many others. His touch might bring a blessing to these children.² When the disciples, for whatever reason, try to stop this, Jesus rebukes them, saying, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.”

While thankfully we do not experience the mortality statistics of Jesus’ time in the United States today, Jesus’ words open up the radical inclusion of God’s kingdom, or God’s reign. We don’t know why the disciples decided that Jesus shouldn’t be bothered with the children. Jesus,

however, sternly corrects his disciples, not simply encouraging others to bring the children to him, but inviting those who were often overlooked and most vulnerable, saying, “Let the little children come to me,” boldly declaring that God’s kingdom belongs to them.

Many years ago, I heard a story about Mother Theresa. I could not find it again to confirm the truth of it or not, but the story speaks volumes to me every time I think of it. It is said that one day someone heard the voice of a child crying during mass while Mother Theresa was present. Those around tried to soothe and silence the baby so that the mass would not be interrupted by the baby’s cries.

Mother Theresa, however, paused and then pointed out that a baby’s cries were one of the most certain signs of life in worship. In Calcutta, Mother Theresa had seen babies so sick and malnourished that they could not cry. A crying baby is a sign of health and life. It seems Mother Theresa understood well that children, crying babies especially, are visible signs of God’s presence and God’s kingdom among us.

The liturgy for confirmation and the reaffirmation of our faith is deeply rooted in our baptismal vows. If baptism is the start of that journey, confirmation is not an end but an important moment along the way. After the description of baptism that I mentioned a moment ago, the liturgy continues with “Through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ’s holy Church.”

In one of my favorite scenes from the classic movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, George Clooney’s character, Everett, finds himself in the woods on the run from the law with two other jailbirds, Delmar and Pete. As they roast a gopher together over a campfire, suddenly a congregation appears, dressed in white baptismal gowns. The congregation sings a beautiful spiritual, *Down to the River to Pray*, as they head down to the river to meet with the preacher for baptism. Everett makes a wisecrack, saying, “Well, I guess hard times flush the chumps. Everybody’s looking for answers...”

While Everett is cynically waxing on about this congregation and the foolishness of their faith, Delmar runs right into the river to get baptized. As he exits the water, Delmar says, “Well, that’s it boys, I’ve been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out and heaven everlasting’s my reward.”

Everett asks him, “Delmar, what are you talking about? We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Delmar points out, “The preacher said, ‘All my sins is washed away,’ including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo.”

Everett says, “I thought you said you was innocent of those charges.”

Delmar thinks for a moment and replies, “Well, I was lying. And the preacher says that that sin’s been washed away, too. Neither God nor man’s got nothing on me now. Come on in, boys, the water is fine.”

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” While I’m not so sure that this is the same as Delmar’s faith, Alan Culpepper notes that in Luke’s gospel, the nature of the kingdom of God is that it belongs to such unlikely crowds as the poor, the paralyzed, the tax collectors, the lepers, despised Samaritans, and even the children. If this is the case, then it is reasonable that one must become like a child to be a part of this unlikely list of those who inherit the kingdom of God.³

At confirmation and other sacred moments where we reaffirm our faith, we not only remember what God has done for us already, but we affirm our commitment to God in Jesus Christ and to the Church. For Delmar, that meant he was on the straight and narrow. For most of us, however, we know that is not the case for Delmar or for us. From time to time, we all stumble along this journey of faith. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes our walk is riddled with our own foibles and faults.

The journey of our faith, however, is about continually remembering what God has done for us in baptism and reaffirming our faith commitment throughout our lives. Our baptismal vows are lived out daily as we enter the waters of our baptism to die to ways of living that do not bring life that we might rise in the life that God intends for us in Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to baptize a father and three of his children along with him. He and his wife had an infant, a three-year-old son, and another son around five. After baptizing dad so that the children would see that everything was all right, I baptized the baby and the five year old.

When it came time to baptize the three year old, however, I could see that he was having nothing to do with leaving his dad’s arms for the baptism. So I told the family that he could stay in his father’s arms and that I would just put the water on his forehead. As I reached my hand into the font and raised it to place it on his forehead saying, “I baptize you in the name of the Father,” the little boy yelled out, “NO!” I went in for a second handful with “And of the Son,” to which he continued to yell, “NO!” And to end it well, as I placed my hand upon his head for the third time with the words, “And of the Holy Spirit,” he let out one last “NO!” The congregation was trying to contain their laughter.

Still today, I wonder if the three year old’s response is indeed a great example of our own faith journey. In his own baptism, Jesus bids us all—infants, children, and adults—to come into the waters of baptism that we might rise to the new life that he offers us. The older we get, the more we may struggle to enter those waters each and every day as we live out our baptismal vows.

While the sacrament of baptism is a one-time event because God’s grace is enough for our lifetimes, we continue to live out our vows each and every moment of each day, seeking the grace and empowerment of the Holy Spirit who is with us throughout our lives. Some days, we enter those waters kicking and screaming because it is easier to cling to the life we have come to know than to embrace the fullness of life God intends for us in Jesus Christ. The older we get, the more we realize that it is not always easy to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” Our hearts want to follow Jesus, but our feet can move in opposite directions.

Through confirmation and the sacred moments where we reaffirm our faith, the grace revealed in the waters of our baptism continues to provide us with a good beginning, today and always.

¹<http://www.noevalleyministry.org/2016/01/remember-your-baptism/>

² Culpepper, R. Alan. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX. Ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 344-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 345.