

Sermon: "Baptism as Consecration"

Date: May 30, 2021

Scriptures: Luke 3:1-18

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

In a yard a few miles down the road and around a corner, a child was baptized yesterday in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The water was blessed, the child was prayed over, and the water marked her head as the people around the child smiled. There were glad hearts, happy smiles, and a warm welcome given to the child.

As the child was carried around the circle of people gathered in a place where the child could be safe from the disease that has done so much damage over the past year, the pastor thought through the words he had been reading throughout the week. He smiled and looked upon the child with happy eyes as he prayed that God would listen to his prayer.

A long time ago, in a country far from here, a man invited people to be baptized in a river that passes through the Holy Land to this very day. In the Jordan River, John the Baptist came to preach the good news of God. John encouraged people from all ways of life to turn from broken ways. The tax collectors were told to stop lining their pockets with their collections and the soldiers were told to live lives without extortion or corruption. On the side of the river, John spoke of repentance and told the people that they must return to God.

In the Jordan River, John said true words. John baptized with water but the One that was coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John could baptize with water but ultimately God was the one who would pour out on the people the very thing that was necessary for life.

Last week in worship we celebrated Pentecost and stopped to remember how the Holy Spirit came with “tongues as of fire” to the disciples that were gathered in Jerusalem. Throughout the ages since that time long ago, the church has had moments where it has noted God at work. From the thousands of disciples on Pentecost, to the Gentile conversions in Cornelius’ home, to Christians gathered in villages, to secret gatherings of believing slaves, to tents and street corners where revival was preached, the Holy Spirit has continued to pour out throughout the centuries.

Yesterday, as a pastor stood watching the baptized child, he recalled the words that he had read that week. The words are found in “This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America” by the former Assistant Professor of Christian Nurture at Duke Divinity School, the Rev. Gayle Carlton Felton. Rev. Felton stated, “The church must never believe itself to be in possession of instruments through which God’s grace is guaranteed to operate.”<sup>1</sup>

The words seem strange, but the pastor thought about those words as he considered the truth which has seemingly been stated from generation to generation of pastoral leadership back to the time of Christ. We baptize with water, but we baptize with the example of John the Baptize in mind. We baptize with water, but we pray for the Holy Spirit to enter the life of those we baptize. We can no more command the Holy Spirit than we can command Christ, so we recognize the simple truth that God must work in the life of the person before us. The pastor blesses the water, in an infant’s case the parents and sponsors promise to raise the child, in an adult’s case the child of God asks for God’s blessing, and we baptize with water while waiting for God to act

---

<sup>1</sup> Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 33.

in this life. We do not possess the tools which can bring God's blessing and power into this life. God alone holds such power.

As the pastor watched, he surrendered the child into God's hands. He had done his part and now it was his role to let go. Just as the parents let go of the child as the pastor held the child close and reached into the baptismal waters, the pastor let go of the child, and let God hold her hand. It was a sacred moment of surrender. I can tell you that this is what the pastor was thinking, because I am that pastor.

Now that my dramatic retelling of events in the third person is over, I can simply state that the experience yesterday was powerful. Baptism itself is always a powerful thing. Baptism is a moment of trusting surrender to God. Both the pastor and people come before God with a request for a blessing we cannot accomplish on our own. We wait with baited breath for God to work in the life of the baptized with power and grace. We cannot accomplish this divine deed on our own, but as we pray and apply water on the outside of a person's body, we stop and ask that God would work inside of them in powerful ways. The moment is sacred.

In looking for a simple way to describe what we are doing, one simple way is to see it as an act of consecration. Consecration is the act of making (or declaring) something to be sacred. Something made holy in this fashion is set apart for God's work. The most common references to something being consecrated that most people think of when they think of the word are consecrated grounds set apart for worship or burial, consecrated elements being used in communion, and consecrated water being used in baptism or as holy water in some church cultures. Additionally, missionaries, priests, and pastors are often consecrated for special ministry in the life of the church.

These common uses are quite appropriate. The act of baptism is also an act of consecration. Think about how the very assumption we make when we baptize is the same assumption that John the Baptist made in our reading. We are baptizing with water, but we are preparing the way for the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. We are making a temporary mark with water on the outside of a body with the prayer that God would send the Holy Spirit into the very core of the baptized person's being in a much more permanent way. We are consecrating a life and setting that life apart for the Holy Spirit to enter and work within over the course of that life. The water will dry, but we pray that the effect will last.

In many ways, the very work of the Spirit can be seen as related back to the moment of baptism. When the community surrounds the baptized person with love and grace, offers opportunities for that person to be welcome, invites that person to go deeper in their faith, and encourages that person in their faith journey, that community is continuing the work of baptism. When we offer opportunities for a person to grow in their knowledge of the Bible, we hope that their growth will draw them closer to God. When we send a child to camp or take an adult on a retreat, we pray that they will encounter the Holy Spirit in a fresh way. In many ways, the work of the church in a person's life carries the same intention as baptism. The church works so that the Holy Spirit might bless a person mightily.

It is true that this is the hidden purpose behind many of the things the church does on a regular basis. Ideally, the community of faith surrounds the baptized person and works to prepare the way for God throughout that life. The community of faith may baptize that person with water, offer opportunities for the person's spiritual growth, and provide moments where that person may come face to face with the divine, but ultimately it is God who pours out the Holy Spirit into that

life. The church has small groups, prayer chains, and even hires ministers to assist with the work of bringing the Holy Spirit, but ultimately it is God who does the actual bringing of the Spirit into our lives. We consecrate on the outside but God consecrates the whole being.

Perhaps you are asking a simple question at this point: Why does any of this matter? We are grateful a child was baptized yesterday, but what does that have to do with us? If we promise to take the vow to care for this child seriously, can we please just move on from here?

With all the love in my heart that I can muster, we cannot move on from here yet. Stick with this line of thought for a few more minutes. The reason this matters deeply to our community is that we are a community that sits between several generations with very different cultural understandings. Each of these groups has something we can learn from in these conversations. If this is the first time you have thought about it, the culture around us is changing and in time that means the church will have to speak differently. I ask for your patience as I try to speak across the gaps.

As the rate of childhood baptism drops, many of our own children and grandchildren face a different situation that many older or traditional groups faced. A lot of the children in our community will come to believe as adults and as unbaptized people, they will come to a point where they must choose to be baptized or not. In this, we give thanks that we are Methodists. As John Wesley wrote in a letter to a Baptist minister, Rev. Dr. Free in 1758:<sup>2</sup>

You think the mode of baptism is “necessary to salvation”: I deny that even baptism itself is so. If it were, every Quaker must be

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 32.

damned, which I can in no wise believe. I hold nothing to be (strictly speaking) necessary to salvation but the mind which was in Christ”

As a people, Methodists have always believed that the grace of God supersedes our behavior: God’s grace will not be stopped by a lack of baptismal water. The work of God’s grace is available in all of our lives; however, it should be stated that baptism itself is invaluable in our lives. Nobody is saying that you must be baptized or burn in hell. While there are groups that believe that, the Methodist movement did not begin with that mindset and it has never been at the core of our identity.

When we set ourselves apart and invite God into the deep parts of our lives, we are allowing something deep and holy into our innermost being. While the water does not convey the Holy Spirit, humbling ourselves before God, accepting the gift of baptismal water, and inviting God into our lives can have a powerful life-changing effect within us.

I can testify that I have seen hearts and minds changed through the work of the Holy Spirit. I have seen the most broken of souls find healing and I have seen the hopeless find a reason to face tomorrow. There is something powerful in baptism, which is why we join John the Baptist by the water of life. We stand and invite people to repent of their brokenness and to come to the water. We may have water, but the One we prepare the way for can change us in deep and profound ways. Friends, I have seen people live happier and fuller lives as a result of a faith journey that led to their baptism.

If I were to be asked whether or not I would recommend a person be baptized, I would absolutely invite them to enter the waters. If we are

on an adventure in this life, then the moment of baptism is an opportunity for something new, powerful, and good to enter our lives. Jesus invited the church to baptize people and we encourage the practice whenever appropriate without a moment's hesitation.

I did say that there are different groups who may be here and who may learn different things. For those of us who have been baptized, especially as infants, I want to encourage you to look back and remember your own baptism. Now, some of you might think that's a bit of a stretch. I confess that I cannot remember being baptized as an infant, but I still want to invite you to think about your baptism deeply.

In a few moments we are going to be lifting up a child of God and making promises. We will seek to join with the universal church in supporting this child from a distance, even as we encourage the family to grow in faith and walk with a local church. We may never have the child in a Sunday School class or sit with them at coffee hour. We cannot do many of the things we would do if this child were here in front of us on a weekly basis, but hopefully we will see her throughout the years when she visits her wonderful grandmother.

Do you know who was in church on a regular basis after their baptism though? I was in the church regularly. Many of you were in church regularly. For a lot of people, you may have grown up with youth groups and coffee hours. You may remember summer camp and Sunday School. You can probably look back over potluck suppers and even special concerts at the church. There may have been thousands of times throughout your life when you were in this church building or one like it.

Why does that matter? Have you ever stopped to think about why the people around you took the opportunity to teach Sunday School or

offered you a place to sit in coffee hour? Have you stopped to think about all the times that you were forgiven after goofing around in church or making a huge mess during youth group? Have you ever stopped to think about how many hours people spent over the years cleaning up pews, preparing communion, teaching you in a small group study, or even just praying for you when you were having a difficult time?

I would invite you to think about the fact that every one of those moments might be drawn back to a simple belief: you are a child of God and you are loved. The vows made at your baptism were vows to support and care for you. The church surrounded you with a community that did that day after day, week after week, and year after year. You may not have the ability to remember your baptism, but look back through your life. How many times has the church done the best job it can to fulfill those promises whether or not you saw what it was doing? How often were you blessed without the right hand understanding what the left hand was doing?

You may not remember your baptism, but let's be clear: you are loved deeply by God and this church has spent years trying to invite the Holy Spirit to dwell richly in your life. We may not be perfect at the job, but I can tell you that perfection is not a part of the baptismal vows. You are loved deeply. God loves you deeply and the church has done the best job it can to love you deeply as well.

Next week we are going to hopefully spend some time looking at the baptismal covenant before we share communion together. This week I want to do something strange: I want to give you homework.

If you have been around the church for a while, I want to invite you to think about all of the ways the church has supported you over the

years as well as all the ways that the church has offered to support you over the years. If you want to make a list, feel free to write them down, but the important thing is to think about the ways the church has tried to care for you and tried to help you grow in faith. When you think of the things you are grateful for, take time to give thanks to God.

If you haven't been around the church for a while, I want to invite you to think about where you have been and where you wish you could grow in your faith. I want to invite you to write those things down and then do two specific things with that list. First, pray to God about that list, even if your prayer is simply "God, I want to learn how to be kinder." Second, either talk to me, one of our lay servants, or to someone you trust in the church about where you would like to grow. Help us to find ways to walk alongside you.

Finally, if this is one of the first times you have been in a church and you want to know more about baptism, please get a hold of me to talk. I would love to answer your questions about baptism, the Christian faith, and everything in between. I promise you that I do not bite and will not throw you out of the church community because you have sincere questions or opinions. Reach out and I'll reach back.

Meanwhile, we have a child of God to pledge to support, so let us pray, sing, and get to those promises...

---

*For your reference as a reader of this sermon, the promise we made was:*

*Members of the household faith,  
I commend to your love and care,*

*this child,  
whom we this day recognize as a  
member of the family of God.*

*Will you endeavor to live  
that this child may grow in the  
knowledge and love of God,  
through our Savior Jesus Christ?*

***With God's help***

***We will so order our lives after the  
example of Christ,  
that this child, surrounded by  
steadfast love, may be  
established in the faith,  
and confirmed and strengthened  
in the way that leads to life  
eternal.***