

Baptism: A Sign of Belonging

Text: Genesis 17:7, 13; Acts 2:39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant." Genesis 17:7,13

"For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away..." Acts 2:39

In his best selling book, *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore deals with the spiritual emptiness of contemporary society. Thomas Moore writes not fluff. It's a heavy book, and he has expressed his amazement that it found its way on to the *New York Times* hard cover Best Seller List, and now continues some 21 weeks on the paperback Best Seller List. Obviously, Thomas Moore has touched a nerve in our contemporary human experience. He says what all of us know down deep, that we have no depths, that we have neglected our soul, that depth-dimension of the human person.

He gives us two images of our contemporary life. The first is fast food: fast food rather than the ritual of dining. The gathering of the family around the table to share a meal is an experience becoming more and more rare in our contemporary experience. And the second image: rather than reflective commentary and news analysis, journalism becomes sound bites. Fast food and sound bites. We live at an accelerating pace. Technological breakthroughs create new horizons for human experience. We are whirling on a planet spinning out of control and our lives show it.

Perhaps Thomas Moore is right that what is missing is the very kind of thing we are engaged in here—a regular appointment. We gather in this sacred space with all of its associations of experiences past: its furniture, its whole setting, the environment, the feel of this moment. For so many of our contemporaries there is no longer a regular appointment like this. And even for us, increasingly it becomes an option when Sunday morning dawns. In my earlier ministry, I did

everything I could get you to come to church, not only on Sunday morning, but, God forbid, on Sunday evening too. The whole day shot to heaven. (Laughter) I'm afraid I probably did so because of certain ego needs. I was fooling myself saying that what I really wanted was God's people to hear God's word when I really wanted God's people to hear God's word *through me*. And, beyond that, if I had to be there, by George, they ought to be there too. So there was, in a previous era, some imposition of guilt, and a bit of manipulation.

But, I am older now, as must be self-evident, and I wouldn't lay that on you. That's a heavy obligation. Now I would say to you, "You *need* to be here." You need to be here, not just occasionally, once in a while, willy-nilly. You need to be here because your soul needs what happens here beyond whether or not the sermon was scintillating, or suffocating. You need to be here to open your soul to something beyond the ordinary and the humdrum, the rapidity of the days that fly by. You need to be here because the soul needs to be nourished, and it is at appointments like this where there are certain ritual actions and there are certain words and formulas, that touch us, not necessarily rationally, intellectually, but down in our depths.

We need to be here on a week like this, when Peter relays all those who have just been in the hospital, the birth and death of an infant, the birth and complications of another infant, the death of an aged saint, the celebration of marriage, the celebration of baptisms – all of these things in the mix of human experience. In a week like this, dear God, don't we know that we don't have stamina enough to make it on our own without that connection to a world beyond that which is time and space and manageable?

Maybe a symbol of our contemporary society is O. J. Simpson. The whole nation was glued to their television sets in that bizarre Friday night tale as it unraveled, watching with apprehension one of the highest profile persons in the nation, with friends saying, "Oh, I talked with him and he seemed himself." Yesterday in the *Detroit Free Press*, was a column by Mitch Albom. He pointed out that here's this person whose face everyone recognizes, who has achieved larger than life status: our hero, fantastic gifts, great accomplishments. Then, if the charge is true, in a moment of passion he erupts in violence, which results in a murder, which shocks the nation in its brutality. Yet as Mitch Albom says, "Did you know him? Nobody knows him. Nobody knows nobody." We live with the facade with which we engage one another. But who knows the raging storm within? And O.J. Simpson is not unique. He is a symptom. It is happening every day with lesser known folk, so less is known about it. But the rage lies within people who do not know who they are, or whose they are.

That's why a morning like this is so important. That's why what transpires at this baptismal font is so important. For baptism is the Christian Church's sign of belonging, belonging to that community of faith that stretches back into Israel's history – that community which gathered around Abraham and Sarah, which

became Israel, from which Jesus issued, the One who was crucified, risen, ascended, and gave his Spirit. The Spirit of God breathed in the midst of that people who were gathered around that story and who were marked with a new sign, a sign of baptism. Water is the sign of the cross—a sign that one is a child of God.

I have a friend, a colleague of mine in seminary who, in groups where one had to introduce oneself, the groups we often squirm thinking about, would always say his name and then he would add, "Child of God." Name, "Child of God." Who are you? Dick Rhem, Child of God. Who are you? Your name, Child of God.

So we baptize. We bathe it in prayer because this ritual action which stretches back across the centuries and puts us in touch with that whole community of faith past is an action in which God is the actor. God is the agent and we simply are the instruments, by which the gift of God's breath, God's enlivening breath, wind Spirit, is received by the child. The most dramatic, most vivid example of grace in the Church, is that passive receptive child receiving the sign, the mark of grace, of eternal love, of covenant, binding one to the eternal God, a binding that will never, never be broken. What happens? Who knows. But in obedience we mediate the sign, believing that God is the actor.

We do it differently than ten years previous. I came into the ministry along with the elders, understanding that baptism needed to be requested and sometimes granted, and perhaps sometimes not granted if those who requested had not proven their faithfulness. How wrong that is, you see, because baptism is not the Church's gift to be given to those who merit it. Baptism is a sign that God gives to a child on the basis of God's promise, "I will be your God and a God to your children." We used to gather parents here and would say, "Do you ... will you ... do you promise?" and *then* baptize the child. *Then* I heard in St. Pierre's Cathedral, the home church of John Calvin, how it was reversed. The baptism was performed and *then* the parents were given opportunity to answer such questions. I knew immediately that was right. Baptism is *God's* gift; God is the actor. It is pure grace and, in the light of that grace, one says, "Oh, yes I will, with all my heart." Of course, in the light of all of that.

Maybe I can make it clear by a comparison. Sometimes comparisons help us to lift up certain dimensions. No criticism of the Baptist Church. Thank God for all good Baptists everywhere. But the Baptists also recognize and have increasingly felt the need of some kind of ritual for infants, even though the hallmark of the Baptist communion is that one must say that one believes and then be baptized so that baptism is an adult affair. Now increasingly in Baptist churches there are dedication services. Do you see the different nuance? Here God is the actor and the parental response is response to God's initiating grace. In a dedicatory service the focus is on the human person's act of dedication. It is a different spin. It is a different nuance. I prefer it this way—all of God. All of grace. Pure gift. That which moves then in response of worship and adoration and following in the way

of Jesus. Marked, belonging by God's choice. God's gift, so that when the bottom falls out and the roof caves in and the foundations shake, and it seems that darkness will overcome us, we can do as Martin Luther used to do in those moments of deep temptation and despair. He would cry out, "I have been baptized."

Baptism is not a sentimental ceremony for little infants in arms. It is a gift of God that marks us throughout all of our days, so that come what may one is able to say, "I have been marked," with a sign of love, by a God that shall never let me go. Thank God.