

Baptism: A Means of Grace: A Sign of Belonging

From the series: The Sacramental Character of the Church

Genesis 17:11; Acts 2:38-39

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant...
Genesis 17:11

Repent, and be baptized every one of you ... For the promise is for you, for your children... Acts 2:38-39

The conception of the Covenant Community that had characterized Israel all its days was reaffirmed on that first Pentecost in a most beautiful way. The Covenant Community, instituted first in Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac, was to be a special people called by God. That community was given a sign of belonging, a right of initiation. It was the sign of circumcision, and in that Old Testament community, Abraham received the sign at 99 years, Ishmael at 13 years (Yes, parents there is even hope for adolescents), and if we would go to chapter 21, we see little Isaac at 8 days, all receiving the same sign, with the same meaning: *a means of grace, a sign of belonging*. This special people marked their flesh and were set apart by God for a special purpose: to be God's people in the world, to bear witness to the light and the salvation that God's grace would create and was creating a people by which God would finally realize God's eternal purposes of love for the world.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter pointed to Jesus, the crucified one who was now exalted by God and present in the power of the Spirit. He said, "This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised up." And they said, "Well, what should we do?" Peter said, "Repent. Change your mind. Revolutionize your thinking. Recognize that you have to turn around 180 degrees and recognize that this one that was crucified was indeed God's special envoy, the Word of God incarnate in your midst. Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins. For the promise is to you and to your children, and all who are afar off to the extent of the world - the universalizing grace of God now through the Gospel. The promise is to you."

What promise? The covenant promise. The promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah. "I will be a God to you and to your seed after you." The heart of the

covenant promise is the Word of God, *"I will be your God and you will be my people."* And in that Old Testament community the sign of circumcision functioned as a mark in their flesh of special relationship to God, for special work in the world. And in the New Testament time, at that hinge point in the life of the people of God, Peter stood up and said, "It's the same promise, and it means the same thing, and so change your minds and be washed in waters of baptism. For the promise is yours as well - and your children's." *Baptism - a means of grace, a sign of belonging.*

I want to begin this morning to reflect with you for a week or two or three or four on the Sacramental Character of the Church. I could do little more than introduce the idea this morning, and probably I can do that best by giving you a bit of a personal narrative of how I have moved through the years of my ministry to an ever-deepening appreciation and experience of the meaningfulness of the sacramental life of the Church. Now, as Pam said, "I am an incurable preacher." I can't really help myself - that's all I can do and I just keep on doing it and would probably wither up and die if I couldn't preach any more. I am reflective of the Reformed tradition in which I have been nurtured and shaped, and educated in the centrality of the Word of God, the centrality of the proclamation of the Word of God, the centrality of preaching.

In the Reformed tradition we have said that table and pulpit are equally important on the same level but, as a matter of fact, the pulpit has far ascended or moved to the ascendancy. We are a people of the Word. We have been shaped by preaching. We have continued to baptize adults and infants and, in our tradition, quarterly to come to this Eucharist table. But really, the sermon has been the thing.

I always believed in the power of preaching. I never experienced in my earlier years a great impact of the sacraments - in our case, the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Roman Catholic tradition has seven sacraments. It doesn't really matter. It is foolish to argue about those things, but in our tradition, in Protestantism at large: baptism and Lord's Supper. And we've continued to do that, but I have to admit that I was leery of baptism in my earlier years. If you would go back in the archives of the *Church Herald*, the house organ of the Reformed Church in American, back in about 1961-1962 when I was at this congregation right out of seminary (really should have been put in a cage for a few years), but they let me loose on this congregation. A great sign of grace is that after being gone for seven years, they even asked me back.

In those early years I wrote an article that appeared in the *Church Herald* entitled, "Covenant Children Must Be Converted." What was I worried about? I was worried about too much reliance on covenant relationship. I was worried about too much reliance on the sacrament of baptism, as creating a genuine and authentic relationship to God. I wanted to say, "You've got to be converted." Oh, I used to burn up the aisles, pound the pulpit, really get excited in my youth.

Now, in the springtime of my senility, (Laughter) I have come to see the sermon as a very shaky business. The more preachers I get to know, and the more sermons that I hear as I flip through the dial and watch the television tube, the more distrust I have of preachers and their preaching. There is all too much freedom given to preachers. Too much arbitrary word going out - going out with such pomp and circumstance - with such dogmatic assurance, knowing things that one wonders if even God knows. I don't trust the sermon any more. I still believe in preaching. (We are not going to take a vote on that in this congregation this morning. (Laughter.) I've got a few vocational years to fulfill yet, so I want us to take that vote in another ten years or so.)

But, I want to say to you that I am more impressed today with this baptismal font (reaching into the font) and the water that runs down the beautiful little noses of lovely little children. Not as a cutesy little ceremony, but as a sign of grace. As a sign of grace. The sermon was given vivid and eloquent expression this morning before the sermon began. The message was in the infant in arms. The infant presented. The infant signed. The recipient of grace. And as that child grows, that child has been marked. In our practice as we continue to deepen that experience, we present the candle so that it might be an annual celebration, that the child might learn to know "I have been baptized. I have been graced. I am claimed. I belong to Jesus." That such children will have imprinted upon their minds and in the very fabric of their beings that they belong to God through Jesus Christ. And that a day will come - as we had two or three weeks ago, when this whole rail was lined up with wonderful young people - when they can say in their own person, "Yes. I belong to Jesus. My decision. My choice." And then we bring them here and give them a fatter candle from this same fire and say to them, "Now, no longer need your parents to light that candle on the anniversary of your baptism. Now you will light that candle when you need to know the light of Jesus in the darkness of your adolescence, in the struggles of your youth, into your adulthood."

The story is told of Luther who had this vivid sense of the reality of the devil that may be apocryphal, I don't know, but you know he threw the ink well at the devil. And whenever he got severely tempted, Luther could say, "I have been baptized. I have been baptized. I have been claimed. I have been owned. I am undergirded. I am overshadowed. I am embraced." Baptism - a means of grace.

In the early years of my ministry I trusted the sermon - my ability to convince, to persuade, to demonstrate. Now I know that if you put a paper bag over my head, and put a string around my neck I would be dead in a short time because all that proceeds from my mouth is gas - deadly gas. It has no power except when God breathes (pew) through the word. In the early days of my ministry I was worried that children baptized might count too much on it and, therefore, I called on them to conversion. Now I want to say to our little ones until I am blue in the face, "You belong to Jesus. You belong to Jesus. You belong to Jesus." Until as a rose quietly, gently opening before the warming rays of the sun, they simply open

up their lives to the God who created them and has loved them from everlasting to everlasting.

I don't know why in the early years of my own experience I didn't trust my own experience, which was filled with such nurture; I had such a home, such a church, so that I never knew a moment in which I did not know that I belonged to God. But now at least before it is too late for all of us here, we can come to see in baptismal waters, in the application of the water to the child, pure grace. All is grace. All is grace. Not in our coming forward, not in our affirmations, not in our rigorous execution of duty. Not in our morality. Not in our status. Not in our works. Nothing in us! All in God. All in grace. The sign of it - the infant marked and receiving passively a sign that says, "All is God's. All is grace. You are not your own, but you belong to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

That promise. This water. (Pouring water through his hand.) Bread. Cup. Touch. We are bodies after all and grace is experienced when we touch - and taste - and hug - and partake - and experience the water of regeneration. All of God. All is of grace. Thank God we have been baptized, signed as belonging.

Graced. Graced. Graced. All is grace. Isn't that good! Thanks be to God!