

Martin Luther is famous for exhorting, “Remember your baptism!” Preachers around the world have been encouraged to recall their own personal experiences of baptism before approaching the pulpit this Sunday, which (as you heard a moment ago) commemorates the baptism of Jesus. Bless you, you’ve heard my story more times than I can recall, and can likely tell that story in your sleep. For those of you who haven’t heard it, rest assured that I’ll likely re-visit it another day.

Usually, the Church talks about baptism as an initiation rite into the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers who hail Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It has been compared to a homecoming party or a family reunion. And it is, but it’s more.

Baptism has been understood as a cleansing from sin, the once-for-all ritual of spiritual purification and sanctification. And it is, but it’s more.

Baptism has also been understood as a cloak of grace, a ticket into heaven, and a talisman against evil. Let’s not confuse superstition with theology. Let me be clear. It is *not* a cloak of grace, a ticket into heaven, or a talisman against evil.

Baptism is not only about the life of the one baptized. It is about being a part of something bigger, something more. Being baptized does not prevent us from our tendency to wander away from God, and it does not make us holier than anyone else (we are all on a journey, and all of us trip up and lose our way from time to time). It is neither a hocus-pocus spell to keep bad things from happening to us in this life (bad things happen to good people all the time), nor is it a free entry pass through the ‘pearly gates’ (we can see, for example, that the thief who was crucified alongside Jesus did not need to be baptized in order to be redeemed).

The Catechism in our Prayer Book defines baptism as “the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.”¹

I was listening to a podcast the other day, and the moderator² was talking about his relationship with his dad as he was growing up. He was careful to preface his remarks by saying that his dad was not perfect – he had a bit of a temper and he

¹ BCP page 858

² Rev. Rob McCoy, Pulpit Fiction, episode 466

made many parenting mistakes. But the moderator said that he remembered that while living at home, every night at bedtime, they gave each other a hug and a kiss and told each other, 'I love you.' This is the first memory that the man holds of his father, and has been the most profound influence on him as a father himself. No matter how angry or disappointed he made his dad, he always felt safe and welcome to approach his father at bedtime, and was greeted with words of affection and goodwill.

It is a beautiful thing to be held tenderly with love simply because you *are*, simply because you exist. It is in the accepting of that state of belovedness in relationship with God that is the point of baptism ~ this is true for Jesus' baptism as well as for each of our own. Jesus knew he was beloved before the voice of God audibly proclaimed it, yet Jesus entered the baptismal waters as an outward and visible sign of God's grace that he wholeheartedly accepted, and which (from that moment forward) defined his identity. As we well know, his entire life was given over the purpose of (1) **exposing** *our* belovedness, (2) **inviting** us to live into the reality that we are eagerly welcomed into a relationship of unmerited grace and love with God, and (3) **eliminating** all the barriers what would prevent us from accepting that invitation.

The Grace of God wasn't initiated with the coming of Jesus into the world; it was fulfilled by Jesus coming into the world.³ And our sacramental participation calls us to exposing the belovedness of others, inviting them into relationship with Christ, and cultivating the best in everyone we encounter.

As the podcast story continued, the speaker talked about how their dynamic shifted as he grew into a surly teen. At some point, he felt he no longer needed that nightly ritual, yet his father unfailingly came and knocked on his bedroom door, and offered those same words: 'I love you.' Similarly, the grace and love of God are ours whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

Those who decide as teens or adults to get baptized make a conscious choice to accept God's grace and love. To live into it. To define themselves by it. To respond to God's invitation into relationship by saying 'yes, I *am* beloved.'

As such, baptism is a personal choice, but it is never private. That affirmation of faith is made publicly, with special intention to live in community in ways that build up the kingdom of God that we have inherited and of which we have become

³ Rev. Cheryl Lindsay

stewards. And the community has a role in our lives as baptized Christians: the Body of Christ vows to uphold us in our life and ministry, holding us accountable to the promises we made, and journeying with us through life's ups and downs.

When we baptize our young children who cannot yet make their own profession of faith (that profession of acceptance and belovedness), we do so because we want them to grow up imbued with the self-understanding that they are beloved of God ... simply because they exist. And there is nothing they can do, or that can be done to them, that can change that reality.

As I reflect on that podcast story of the man's childhood bedtime routine with his father, I'm reminded all over again that grace is an ongoing gift, not a one-time event. Whether we receive it from God or from one another, grace enables us to live in community and right relationship despite our shortcomings, mistakes, and failures. Grace enables reconciliation and restoration. Grace welcomes us back to the Table and invites our return to the circle. Grace reminds us that none of us walks this journey perfectly, and it affirms our humanity beyond our performance. Grace calls us worthy and included and beloved. And that Grace is there waiting for us to accept, to live into, to help us both navigate and define our lives.

As you go about your business this week, I pray that you not only remember your baptism, but you embrace it, define yourself by it, conform your inner space to it, craft your words in light of it. Because you are beloved of God. And so is everybody else.

I'll close with a blessing by John O'Donohue:

May you realize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe. May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment. Amen.