

Betsey Moe
Sermon 8.30.09
“All Wet”

The focus of this morning’s worship service was prompted by a few questions about baptism that I’ll be addressing in the sermon:

Why do some churches wait until children are older to be baptized? (I would guess there are people out there who would ask the converse: Why do we baptize infants?)
Must you be baptized to go to heaven?
What is the purpose of baptism?

Romans 6:3-11

3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

This summer on vacation, I became aware of the fact that I am in danger of becoming a fuddy duddy. Let me explain. We spent a week at my parents’ cabin on Coeur d’Alene Lake at the beginning of August. The weather was beautiful for most of the week. At nine o’clock in the morning, Henry would walk out onto the dock and yell, “Mom, come out here! Jump in with me, and we’ll swim to shore!” I’d say, “No, Henry. I’m not ready to get in yet. I’ll just watch you.” At eleven o’clock, more kids and some adults would be in the water. “Mom,” Henry would say, “Come in! The water is so warm!” “Nah,” I’d say. I’m going to sit here and take pictures or read my magazine.” I had just showered and dried my hair, you see, and I didn’t want to mess it up. Three o’clock would roll around. “Mom, come in with me!” Feeling guilty, I would go sit on the edge of the dock and dangle my feet in. You see – I’m becoming a fuddy duddy.

On the hottest days this summer, our kids would be running through the sprinkler in our front lawn – and not just running – standing right over the sprinkler head, leaning their faces and hair into the little geyser with their eyes squinted shut, relishing the cool stream of water. And where was I? Sitting on the front step saying, “Now, remember not to spray me!” My kids know that there is no eviler eye than mom’s eye after she has been sprayed with a hose. I would rather get heatstroke than get hit by a wild shot of water. I’m becoming a fuddy duddy.

Luckily, there are other fun activities I like to do with my kids – but when it comes to water, I’m realizing that the older I get, the more reluctant I am to get wet. I’m worried about my clothes, my hair, my mascara.

As I think about baptism and how we have come to practice and understand it in the church, I wonder if there is a bit of the same reluctance – not toward how literally wet we get – but toward the figurative plunge into the life of God. How wet are we willing to get when we enter into the Christian life?

The Apostle Paul would have said that baptism is something that soaks a person spiritually. There is no way simply to dangle your feet in when entering into the life of God. In today's passage from Romans 6, Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Baptisms themselves – particularly full immersion baptisms when the person goes underwater and comes back up, emulate the death-resurrection pattern of Christ. But Paul is saying that the *life* of the baptized emulates the death-resurrection pattern of Christ. The old self is crucified with Christ; sin no longer has ultimate power in that person's life. Let me be clear: baptism itself is not what brings salvation; Christ crucified and risen brings salvation. But the benefits of salvation -- the knowledge that sin no longer has that enslaving power, that we've been included in the story of salvation – come to us, enter into us, and change us when we enter into Christ through baptism. People who go through Christian baptism are joining the creative, self-sacrificing, unpredictable life of the triune God and are made participants in God's mission. Christian baptism is a plunge, a dive into the deep end, not a toe-dip from the side.

The passage that Penny read from John also pushes us to consider the whole-life commitment that it takes to be a follower of Christ. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to Jesus at night when no one was around to ask him a few questions – you might say he was a faithful Jew dipping his toe into the way of Christ. "Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus had his facts right. The head knowledge seemed to be there. But Jesus responded by saying that knowledge wasn't enough: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being [born again or] born from above" (John 3:2-3). A whole-life surrender to a new way of being – a full-body plunge rather than a toe-dip -- was what it took to see God, to be in a relationship with God.

If a whole-life surrender is so important, then why, you may ask, do we baptize infants? Here is that first question of faith. In the Presbyterian Church, we baptize both infants and children whose parents make the decision for them *and* youth and adults who come to baptism by their own choice. Both ways are plunges rather than toe-dips, and both are important for expressing the fullest meaning of baptism: that faith is both a gift *and* a choice.

When an infant or toddler is baptized, baptism is a sign that God's grace comes to us before we are able to make a decision to live for Christ. The Spirit of God is like the wind, Jesus tells Nicodemus. It blows where it chooses, coming to us, making space for new birth, prompting a profession of faith. Faith is a gift; infant baptism is a sign of this truth. Infant baptism is also a practice that encourages Christian parents, who are already people of faith, to take seriously their covenant responsibility to pass on their faith. Infant baptism is a whole-life plunge that Christian parents choose to make on behalf of their children – then, all along life's way, those children will

have the choice to take the plunge on their own – and it is important for us as a church to present opportunities for them to respond, to make decisions of commitment.

But we also baptize youth and adults in the Presbyterian Church – people who make a conscious decision to follow Christ who have not previously been baptized. Whereas infant baptism points to the grace of God that comes before we are capable of responding and the responsibility of a Christian community, adult baptism points to the importance of human decision in the life of faith. When we witness the baptism of a youth or adult, we remember that we are called each day to *choose* whom we will serve, to make a conscious choice to receive and respond to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Rick Melin, our former Presbytery Executive, used to end every Presbytery meeting (these are gatherings of pastors and elders from all over our region) by asking, “How many adult baptisms did we have in the Presbytery since we last met?” Rick knew that adult baptisms were a sign that the church was on the move – that we weren’t just gaining members by birth, but that real evangelism was taking place. People who were not previously committed to Christ had taken the plunge into the life and death and resurrection of Christ and were committed to the mission of the church.

In either practice of baptism – infant or adult, there is the possibility that it will be used as an excuse to be lazy. That parents would present their children for baptism only to guarantee them eternal life, while having no intention of nurturing them in faith. That a grown person would profess faith in Christ and be baptized, then think, “Since I’m baptized, I can sin all I want – because I belong to God in the end.” These are exactly the attitudes Paul was addressing in Romans. There will always be people who go through the motions of baptism. Because faith is a gift, we have no idea how God will grab them and transform them despite any skewed views of baptism. Because faith is a choice, these people may not be aware of the effects of transformation until they consciously choose to follow in the way of Christ. Baptism is both an act of God that is effective despite us *and* one of those experiences where you get out of it what you put into it. What is certain, according to Paul, is that being baptized into the life of the triune God will not leave us the same – because the one who urges us out into the water has plunged in beside us.

Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, reflects in one section about her own longing for control in life. She grew up with frizzy hair which she always tried to “shellac into submission.” Any sign of rain would bring fear and a pit in her stomach. She realized that this fear of being wet, this desperate desire for control, was related to baptism. She writes:

“Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that’s a little sloppy because at the same time it’s also holy, and absurd. It’s about surrender, giving in to all those things we can’t control; it’s a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get *drenched*.” (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 231.)

The surrender that Lamott is describing here – the surrender to get drenched – is a surrender to a God who has plunged in with us and will include us in God’s activity in the world. All wet, we will be people who long for justice, who side with the weak, the powerless, those who cannot speak for themselves. If we *do* find ourselves getting dry – uninvolved with the oppressed, at arm’s length from the weak and those on the fringes, it’s probably time to remember our baptisms, to remember that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into a life of death and resurrection – and that staying dry is overrated.

I remember one day on our vacation at the lake – the weather had turned unexpectedly cold – and the rain started to come down in sheets. Some friends of ours were out visiting for the afternoon, and all of our kids decided they were going to go swimming. I’ll never forget watching them from the covered porch as they ran through the downpour in their swimsuits – the rain hitting their bare backs – and then, one by one, they plugged their noses and jumped off of the dock into the lake, screaming, laughing, splashing. Maybe next summer I’ll join them – or maybe not – but the next time I witness a baptism and remember my own, I’ll think of this image and take the plunge once again into the adventure and challenge of the Christian life.