

Three Powerful Gifts – 2. The Power of Baptism
Luke 3:3, 21-22; Matthew 28:18-20
June 30, 2024
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A number of years ago, at one of my previous churches, I was teaching some of our young children about baptism. And at the end of the lesson, I invited them each to dip their hands into the water and make a sign of the cross. Then, I said to them: “remember your baptism and be thankful.”

These words, of course, are a common blessing upon us anytime we remember our baptism. But as I looked around at these kids, one of them was visibly upset. I couldn’t understand what had changed their mode so suddenly, so I asked, “my dear, what’s wrong?” With big doe eyes and a serious face, they looked at me and said, *“but Pastor it’s ALL wrong. I can’t remember my baptism!”*

Now, I suspect that there are many of us who don’t remember our baptism - as many, though not all, of baptized as infants.



I was baptized around a month old, in that same little country church I showed you a photo of last week. The same pastor who married my parents, and would baptized my younger siblings, presided. The baptismal font used that day had held the waters of baptism for three generations of my family. Three of my uncles stood next to me, as Godparents, promising alongside my parents and the whole church to pray for me, guide me, and raise me to know Jesus’ love.

I vaguely remember my brother’s baptism, as I was 8 years old then. But the first baptism I have real memory of was a little boy named Peter. His family went to our church and were close friends. I was 11 when he was born, and he was “my first” baby. I lugged him around and “babysat” him as often as I could. My Grandma often said, if I was missing at church you only needed to listen for the baby, because I was certain to be near by. I loved that little boy and his brothers and spent many, many hours with them over the years.

But the day Peter was born was a special one in my memory. On that day, the family and Godparents stood around the font. But then another invitation was made. All the children of the church were invited to come stand around the font as well. We were given a “front row” view and were close enough to see every wiggle he made as the waters met his forehead.

I remember feeling a sense of pride and responsibility when our pastor asked the congregation the baptism vows. Yes, by God’s help, I would love this little boy very much and do my best to raise him to know Jesus’ love.

It was an important moment for me. I already knew I wanted to be a pastor, so I watched and studied the pastors actions carefully. But more significantly, I felt empowered - as if my 11 year old self was an important part of the church and I was just given a real responsibility.

This is also why, in every baptism I've presided over throughout my ministry, I've invited the kids to come forward to see and experience the sacrament up close. And I always whisper a prayer that they be empowered, too, to love and care for one another.

Today we are on the middle of a three part sermon series exploring THREE POWERFUL GIFTS we've received from God. Last week, we learned about the gift that is the church. Next week we will hear about the gift of holy communion. But today? Today we hear about the power and gift of baptism.

In the United Methodist Church, we recognize two sacraments- baptism and communion. Sacraments are a means of God's grace - which is to say they are an important way we experience and celebrate the presence of Christ's redeeming, loving, forgiving work in our lives.

Sacraments have two other things in common: (1) Jesus commanded and practiced them, and (2) they use tangible, ordinary elements (in the case of baptism- water; and in communion it is the bread and cup) to reveal the extraordinary presence of God in and for us. They are an outward and visible sign of an inward grace.

Other rites in the church connect to these sacraments — confirmation, church membership, and the ordination of Pastors are not sacraments themselves, but all point back to the promises made and received at baptism. In each of these liturgies, we ask recipients to reaffirm and remember their baptismal promises, and to see them anew in their lives.

Today, I want to teach you a bit about what we believe about baptism, remind you of your baptismal promises, and inspire you to celebrate the power and gift of baptism in your own life. *And, if you've never been baptized, perhaps you'll notice the Spirit nudging you to consider. If that's the case, please reach out to me or the church office — you're never too old or too young to experience these gifts of God.*

As one of the fundamental elements of the earth, water has long been used in ritual and spiritual ways. You can probably sense why — consider how it refreshing it is to come inside from a hot day and drink a glass of cold water. You can feel the way your entire body is cleansed and refreshed. Or I think about how, as a child, after I had cried or been upset - my Mom would send me to wash my face. Even today, I do that — because there is something refreshing and renewing about the water. It washes us physically, to be sure — but there's also a sort of spiritual and emotional restart as well. This is all to say, that humanity has long recognized the gift of water, and have experienced renewal from it.

Throughout the Old Testament, and in the ancient world, it was common for people to participate in purification and washing rituals. If you found yourself unclean — in the spiritual sense, not only the physical — there were prescribed washing rituals to symbolically cleanse.

We see this, for example, in Ezekiel 36 where it says: *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.* (Ezekiel 36:25-26)

Already here, we notice how God uses water as a sign of God's work and blessings in their lives. It is God's activity with water, that their hearts and lives are changed. And it is a reminder, that it is through God, that we are redeemed. But baptism as the Christian church understands was first introduced in the New Testament when we witness the baptism of Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel tells it this way:

When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

The baptism of Jesus begins to redefine what it is to be washed in the water of God's grace.

Baptism continues to be about the forgiveness of sins — but we see two more things happening: (1) it is a sign of God's Spirit within us, and (2) is an initiation - a public declaration - that we are part of the family of God. As we heard in these verses from Matthew, after Jesus was baptized — *the Spirit of God rested upon him*. This day for Jesus, also marked the start of his ministry. It was a public declaration and celebration for all he would come to preach, teach, and declare.

So too, is it for us. Wesley looked upon Baptism as:

"An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

When we are baptized - we are forgiven, we are filled with God's Spirit, and we are set off on a journey and course of faith. We are made part of the body of Christ and receive God's public declaration that you, too, are one God *dearly loves and finds happiness in*.

Before we go any further, I want to address two misconceptions or misunderstandings about baptism:

1. Sometimes, people have misunderstood and believed baptism is *only* about the washing away of one's sins. There were even debates in the early church of whether you should wait to be baptized until the end of your life, so to be forgiven of a whole lifetime of sins. Or maybe, instead, you need to be baptized every time you sin? Something as frequent as washing your hands.

Eventually they discerned, that baptism is a sacrament we experience once, and it covers our whole being: past, present, and future. We too, understand that baptism is something to experience once - and that it is a sacrament that forgives us, fills us with the Spirit, and celebrates our being part of God's family.

2. Others have misunderstood and thought that you can *only* be part of God's family if you've been baptized. That the *only* way to know salvation is through baptism. But you know, as Methodists - we do NOT believe that baptism is the "golden ticket" for heavenly entry. Baptism is one important way - but not the only way - we experience God's grace. God looks to, and knows, our hearts. This is because baptism is not about what we have done, it is about what God has done.

Before I served as a local church pastor, I completed training as a chaplain. During this time, I worked in the birth center of a local hospital. It was one of the most difficult and holy experiences of my life.

I spent much of my time encouraging birthing parents who were on bedrest in the hospital - often hundreds of miles from their family. I witnessed the beginnings of new life — and sometimes, I held space and cared for babes at the end of their too-short life.

One Mom I cared for, and had gotten to know very well during her pregnancy, asked if we could plan to baptize her baby quickly after delivery. She was likely to deliver significantly early, not yet into her third trimester, and wanted to be sure that baptism was part of her birthing plan.

Of course, I said. But, I asked *why* it was important to her that her child be baptized. Admittedly, I was testing the waters (so to speak) to offer her comfort, if she believed that *not* being baptized would have eternal consequences if her child passed shortly after birth. I wanted to be sure she knew, that no matter what — her beloved baby would be held in God’s loving arms.

Much to my relief, this young Mom said something different. She said, “I want my baby to be baptized to experience something so human... to know what it is to be loved by God, just for being you.” What I heard, was a desire for her child to hear those words of God echo in their heart and soul: *“This is my child, whom I dearly love, I find happiness in them.”*

And so, as it was, the first baptism I officiated was done in a birthing suite, with a congregation made up of Mom, Dad, and a few nurses. And gratefully, several weeks later, this baby made their way home.

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace.
It is an visible sign of an inward truth:
That you are God’s own, before you have done anything of your own.
Baptism is an act of prevenient grace.

We receive the grace, forgiveness and love of God before our doing anything.
Baptism is not about *our* belief or *our* understanding. It is God’s gift, freely given. When you’ve done nothing, before you even believe, God has chosen you.
God finds *happiness* in you.

And so we are baptized, not because it is some “get out of jail” card, but because we *want* to be close, we want to follow, and we want to know Jesus.

We are part of God’s family before we are baptized, we can be faithful followers of Jesus without baptism. While many of us were baptized as infants - it is just as common for folks to be baptized as teens or adults. And they are faithful Christians long before they experience the waters of baptism.

Baptism is a special initiation into the family of God, that publicly celebrates and marks you as God’s own.

Its a little like a marriage in this way — being married is a sign of your love and commitment to your spouse. But you don’t *have* to be married to be loved and committed, right? Instead, a marriage is an outward sign of an inward grace.

We might not be able to say or easily define exactly how things are different, but we know there is a change. There’s something powerful about the experience of publicly declaring your love. And that’s how it is in baptism. We don’t know precisely how or what happens, but we know it is an important and powerful experience of God’s loving grace.

And *because* God never fails, *and* because baptism is a gift from God, where the *action and activity* of baptism is all God’s doing — United Methodists recognize one baptism. This means that you are baptized once, in any Christian body, you never need to be re-baptized.

You're encouraged to re-affirm and remember your baptism, to celebrate again and again God's saving grace in your life. And even to affirm your commitment to God — because

Baptism is a Covenantal Relationship.

When we are baptized, we promise to be in continued relationship with God. We promise to make our relationship with Jesus an ongoing and important part of our life. We celebrate that God accepts and welcomes us as we are, *and* we say that we don't want to stay as we are. We want to grow in holiness, in faithfulness, in love.

And so, within the liturgy of the sacrament of baptism we make four promises. They invite us to: renounce and reject spiritual forces of wickedness, but also evil within our world, and sin within ourselves. This is a commitment to confess and reject sin in all its forms: what is within us and around us. It is a promise to center ourselves on Jesus, and let him be our guide.

We promise to: 'accept the freedom and power God gives' to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever form they present themselves. This gets at our responsibility as followers of Jesus to advocate and care for others. Being a Christian isn't only about *your* relationship with Jesus, it is also about how your relationship with Jesus changes the way you live in the world.

Our baptismal promises hold us accountable to the ways we care for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed. It is from our baptism, that we are meant to advocate and fight for the equality and well-being of others. It is from our baptism, that we are held accountable to the way our actions, or inactions, harm our neighbors, the immigrant, the prisoner, the young and the old — even the earth itself.

The final two vows ask us to: confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, in union with the Church and remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church while being Christ's representatives in the world. Here we recognize Jesus as the one who saves and redeems us, and promise to grow in our love of Christ, our neighbor, and the world.

Baptism is an extraordinary gift, highlighting for us the most important gift of all: that we are loved by God who created us, Christ who redeems us, and the Holy Spirit who empowers us to know, trust, and share this gift. Because what better gift of life is there, than to be loved and to belong?

Friends, as followers of Jesus you have been given unique opportunities and gifts to partake with God in shaping and transforming the world. You get to not only experience these incredible gifts of God, but are able to share and invite others into knowing them, too. How might the promises of baptism shape and encourage you today?

Before we close today, I want to offer the opportunity for each of us to remember and affirm these baptismal promises. *If you have never been baptized, perhaps you'll feel within you a nudging of God's spirit to experience this gift of grace.* And if you have been baptized - even if many years ago, I pray that God's Spirit will nudge and awaken in you a sense of confidence and belonging. Let us pray:

Almighty God, the life you birthed in us by baptism into Jesus Christ will never die. Your justice never fails. Your mercy is everlasting. Surround us today by your Holy Spirit. Let these waters be to us drops of your mercy. Let these waters remind us of your justice. Let these waters

renew in us the resurrection power of Jesus. Let these waters bind us to you and to one another. Amen.

People of God, on behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

ALL: I DO

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

ALL: I DO

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

ALL: I DO

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?

ALL: I DO

Beloveds of God, you have been created and redeemed in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls you his own. Celebrate, give thanks, and remember your baptism. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 30, 2024

Weekly Prayer

Everlasting Lord, thank you for your abundant grace. May your joy be my joy. May your peace be my peace. Strengthen and sustain me today, surrounding me with your loving grace. Amen.

Monday, July 1

Scripture: John 3:15-16, 21-22

so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.

Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

After this Jesus and his disciples went into Judea, where he spent some time with them and was baptizing.

Observation

"The people were filled with expectation" (v15) and it strikes me that the people are *not* filled with surprise. They are waiting and anticipating God to show up among them, expecting God to be revealed through John the Baptist, Jesus, and the waters of Baptism. The gathered crowds would not have found baptism to be an unfamiliar practice; water is a naturally cleansing element and symbolically used in almost every religion.

Application

For most of us, baptism is not a surprising event either, but is an expected and familiar ritual of the church. And still, God is at work in holy ways through the baptismal waters. How is it that

you might wait with eager expectation for God's presence, *even* in the familiar places of your day?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, help me to wait eagerly for your presence to be revealed to me today. Keep me expectant and watchful, so that I see you at work in, around, and through me today. Amen.

Tuesday, July 2

Scripture: Luke 3:1-8

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.*

All humanity will see God's salvation."

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones.

Observation

Nearly four hundred years had gone by with no clear prophetic voice in Israel, and the people were spiritually hungry and waiting. When John the Baptist entered the scene, he offered a needed prophetic voice that the people had longed to hear for generations. He called them to change their ways, to seek forgiveness, and be transformed by God.

Application

John had a clear vision for how children of God were to live. Do you have a clear vision for the ordering of your days? The ways you follow Jesus? Even as the people longed for the presence and voice of the prophet, accepting his words wasn't always easy! What change or practice might God be calling you into that is challenging to accept? How might you seek God's grace today?

Prayer

Everlasting God, you have spoken through prophets throughout the ages. You have called us to follow you faithfully and be transformed. Help me to accept and embrace your vision for my life. Help me to have courage and willingness to change. Amen.

Wednesday, July 3

Scripture: Matthew 3:11, 13-17

I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Observation

John had been preaching, "The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (3:11). Then Jesus appeared. Instead of saying, "Stand aside, John—the main act is here with strength and fire," Jesus joined the line of people waiting for baptism. "John, of course, is horrified.... Surely if anything he, John, needs to be baptized by Jesus himself?" What can we learn from these four verses?

Application

Jesus' baptism signals a few things for us: (1) it reminds us that *all* people are invited to be baptized (not only Gentiles, but all followers), (2) and it is a modeling to us of the kind of servant leadership Jesus will offer. He stands among us and in solidarity with us. Christ knows the human experience fully, and promises to be with us, redeeming us, through it all.

Prayer

Loving Christ, your world-changing impact came to us through small acts of love. Just as you welcome all people and stand among us, help me to offer the same to all those I meet. Open my heart to love others more deeply. Remove from me any sense of fear or judgement, and fill me with grace. Amen.

Thursday, July 4

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Observation

Jesus' resurrection was not the end of his story. It launched a new chapter in establishing his eternal kingdom. As people who believe Jesus is alive, we don't just sit idly and watch God search for others. Jesus' "marching orders" to his followers were that we be his witnesses, making disciples, baptizing and teaching, active partners in God's work of calling humans back

to God. God would empower them for their mission. It's still our mission, and Jesus promised to be with us every day.

Application

In what ways does believing that Jesus rose from the dead change your heart and life? In what ways are you gifted to help carry out Jesus' command?

Prayer

Redeeming God, you have saved and transformed me by water and the word. So inspire me, that my whole life be transformed by your grace. Guide me today, that I might follow your invitation to make disciples and follow you. Amen.

Friday, July 5

Scripture: Acts 2:38-41, 10:45-48

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter asked, "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?" He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited Peter to stay for several days.

Observation

Jesus commissioned his followers to "make disciples, baptizing them." The book of Acts is full of stories of how seriously they took that commission. Baptism developed from only a personal act into an expression of identity with the church, the body of God's people.

Application

Baptism is a public ritual that celebrates that you are part of God's family. It also includes a public commitment to follow Jesus and be part of a faith community. When an infant is baptized, others make these promises on their behalf. And we're reminded that God's grace guides all we do (this infant is part of God's family because of God's loving grace, not their own initiation!) When older children or adults are baptized (or affirm their baptismal promises at confirmation), they take their baptismal vows themselves – but continue to do so in the presence of a faith community, a reminder that we are connected to one another.

As a refresher, here are the baptismal vows of the United Methodist Church:

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races? I do.

According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? I will.

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for the waters of baptism and making me part of God's family. Help me today to follow the promises of baptism through my prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Amen.

Saturday, July 6

Scripture: Romans 6:1-4

So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life.

Observation

Baptism not only celebrates that we are part of God's family, it intimately connects us to the death and resurrection of Jesus as well. This makes us not only recipients of his redeeming grace, but makes us partners with Christ to share this transforming love with the world. Paul saw baptism is much more than simply a ritual. The waters of baptism mark a change within us – and the way we move and act in the world should be markedly changed as well.

Application

How is it that Jesus has made a difference in your life? How is it that the gift of baptism encourages and guides you? (If you have never been baptized, and are interested – please email me and let's chat!).

Prayer

Jesus, you have seen me and you know me. Guide me today to experience fully the gift of new life in you, Amen.