

“Living Down to Our Baptism”

January 11, 2009

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Late one night in a small town, a rusty old pick up was making its way down the street driving slowly, weaving from one side of the street to the other. The sheriff in the small town knew the driver of the pickup, and he knew what was wrong. The sheriff turned his lights on and pulled in behind the pickup that was weaving from side to side. After a block or two, the pickup stopped, the sheriff got out of his car and walked up beside the pickup. Sure enough, the driver of the pickup was the town drunk. Let's call the town drunk Otis. Do you recognize that name? Beside Otis on the seat of the pickup was a jug. Andy, the sheriff, looked inside the truck, saw the jug and said, "Otis, what's in the jug?" Otis said, "Just some water." Andy said, "Let me see the jug." Otis handed Andy the jug, Andy took a drink, and said, "Otis, someone has turned your water into wine." Otis said, "Praise the Lord! He's done it again!"

On the church calendar, this Sunday is known as the "Baptism of Jesus Sunday." It is the Sunday when we think about water. Do you remember the novel by Norman Maclean and the movie of the same name, "A River Runs Through It?" There was a line from the movie that said, "I am haunted by waters." I don't know if as Christians we are haunted by water, but water is important to us. It is one of the sacraments of our church. In our tradition, the communion table has held a more central place in the sanctuary and also for us in our beliefs. In some other traditions, baptism is more important. A minister friend of mine from another denomination said early on he learned that "the three B's" were most important: building, budget, and baptism—not necessarily in that order. He said he baptized one man six times. It was all right with the man because he was uncertain of his salvation, and it was all right with the minister because he padded the baptism statistics when he did that. In our tradition, baptism has not been as important, but it is maybe more important than we think. Maybe there is something happening here that we do not realize or understand fully.

Did you hear the story this week about the couple who was involved in a nasty divorce? The husband was suing for divorce and one thing he said he wanted was the kidney he had donated to his wife. He would settle for money if she would not give back the kidney. Baptism says to

us, "This is a once and for all gift." God says to us, "No matter what happens, no matter what you do or don't do, I will never take back my love from you." Maybe there's something more serious here than we think.

Nine years ago this weekend—I remember it well; it was the weekend after my birthday, just as this weekend is. That year my birthday was on a Saturday. Ryan and Sara and Jayce and Lynnette had come to visit us that weekend. We had a birthday dinner, and an hour or so after the dinner I started feeling not so good. I went back to the bedroom. Suzanne came back a little later to check on me. After a while we both knew what was going on. In previous years, I had already had four or five kidney stones and it was obvious from the symptoms what was going on. I was having another kidney stone.

When we went to the emergency room at the hospital (we had been through this drill before), they would give me a shot of morphine and after a few hours I was able to pass the kidney stone. They gave me a shot of painkiller and I went back home. However, I didn't pass the kidney stone. The next morning, which was a Sunday morning, at about 6:00 a.m. I was back in the emergency room.

If you've ever had a kidney stone I don't have to tell you how it is. If you've never had one, you're lucky. Over that weekend, I think I went to the hospital a couple of more times. That Monday I went to see an urologist. He was sure I had passed the stone by then. Monday night I was back in the emergency room again. On Tuesday I was preparing to have surgery. In the past I had always been able to pass the stones but this time the x-rays showed the stone was stuck and they were going to have to remove it surgically. Before the surgery, a man from the hospital's business office came into my room and said, "Do you have a living will?" I said, "Is it really that serious?" It was more serious than I realized.

Maybe our baptism is more serious than we realize. Do you remember when you were baptized? At Bible Study Wednesday evening, we talked about that. One person said it was a cold time of the year and they were baptized outside in a pond or a creek. Others remembered being a young child and nervous before their baptism. Let me ask you this and you can raise your hands if this was so for you. When you were baptized, did you hear a voice from heaven? Did a dove descend in the light on your shoulder? That didn't happen for any of us. That didn't happen for me, it didn't happen for you. It might have been a life-changing moment for some of us, but a voice . . . a dove? Maybe we weren't watching or

listening. Maybe we didn't expect. Maybe we didn't believe.

There is a way, I believe, that we can hear a voice and experience the dove of Christ's peace in our life. It has to do with what I call "living down to our baptism." In our society, in our culture, we hear about *living up to a reputation*. We want to *work our way up a ladder*. We always want things to be better. There is something about our baptism, something about Christ that calls us to live down to our baptism. Living down to our baptism means adopting the very humility of Christ. Do you remember what Paul said? "He emptied himself of his divinity and took the form of a servant."

I suppose there is a way if you want to be Christian to avoid servanthood, but I'm sure there is no way to follow the example of Christ other than to become a servant. I will never forget one year in another church. It was the time of year when we were looking for Elders and Deacons. We had plenty of people who wanted to be Elders, but were having trouble finding Deacons. A man who had been a member of the church for years, a man who had been an Elder for years, came to me and said, "If you need someone to fill a Deacon position, I'll do that."

Now think about that. In the church we know how it goes. You join the church and after a while you are asked to be a Deacon. If you show some commitment, some leadership, you are later asked to be an Elder. No one becomes an Elder and then becomes a Deacon. This man understood what it meant to "live down to his baptism."

The very persons we choose for leadership positions in the church, Elders and Deacons, when we come to the table during this central act of worship, the ones we choose as leaders, are the ones who serve. They live down to their baptism.

Living down to our baptism means living down to death, the death of sin in our lives. Did you hear Tom Rorschach as he read the scripture this morning? "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" "By no means," Paul said. "We who have been baptized unto death with Christ have died to sin." Living down to our baptism.

Living down to our baptism means that baptism affects all areas of our lives. Can you imagine in our marriages if husbands and wives decided to become servants to each other? Now I can imagine a husband who is here this morning and the wife is absent and later in the week he says to her, "I have decided to become your servant." She would say, "What have you been up to?" It takes both husband and wife doing that.

Living down to our baptism means being a servant in all areas of our lives.

I remember my own baptism. I was baptized in the First Christian Church in Pawnee, Oklahoma. I was waiting back in the back with some of my friends. We were all a little nervous. We were laughing and giggling, the way you do when you're nervous. I was especially nervous because I didn't want to be laughing when I went into the baptistry because it was my father who was doing the baptizing. When I walked down into the baptistry I was biting my tongue. Then I looked up at my dad and I realized something was happening that was maybe more serious than I realized. After my father had pronounced the baptismal formula, before he put me down into the water, I swear I saw a tear on his cheek. He understood what it meant to live down to baptism. Later I baptized my own children and I understood in a new way what it meant to live down to baptism.

Through the years I have baptized others who have reinforced that belief for me. When we lived at Stroud, an Elder in the church who was a horse trainer, called and said, "I'd like for you to visit a couple. There's a guy out here at the horse track who is also a horse trainer, but he and his wife are not members of any church." I went to call on this guy who was known as Big John. Big John and his wife decided to join the church. They came down one afternoon and were baptized. Big John weighed about 375 pounds. When Big John and I went into the water, water went everywhere. I was worried about lifting him up out of the water. The problem was, when I laid him back into the water, he popped up like a cork! I had to lean on him to get him submerged in the water, then lift him up.

Another time, a friend called about a man who was living in a nursing home, a man by the name of David. The associate minister and I went to visit this man. He was mute, unable to speak, a double amputee. The church member had said he was close to death. We visited for a while and I asked David if he wanted to be baptized. He nodded his head. I went over to the lavatory that was in his room and got some water in my hand and put it on his head and baptized him. The next week David died. I could not help but remember the rest of what Paul said about baptism. "We have been buried with him in baptism unto death so that we, too, might walk in newness of life." I could imagine David in heaven on two strong legs, praising God with a new voice for eternity.

I shared with the Bible study group last Wednesday evening one of my favorite stories of baptism. I was meeting with a family to plan for their mother's funeral. After we had made the funeral plans, the rest of the family left except for her son. The two of us were visiting and he said to me, "My mother always wanted me to be baptized but I never was. Do you think we could do that now?" So on the day of her funeral, after the funeral service and after we had gone to the cemetery, the son and I returned to the church. It was just the two of us. I don't know if you have ever been in a church sanctuary by yourself in the middle of the week, but it is a quiet place, so quiet that you can almost hear a church mouse sneeze. In this quiet place, this woman's son and I went into the baptistry. When I baptized him and he came up out of the water in this quiet place, he shouted, "Praise God!" It scared me to death. I'd never had anyone do that after I had baptized them. Maybe he realized it was more serious than he thought.

As Christians, we are called to live down to our baptisms in such a way that it affects all areas of our lives. In preparation for this sermon, I read something about baptism that I had never thought of before. The writer said, "We would never ask someone, 'Were you married?' Instead we say, 'Are you married?' We say 'Were you baptized?' when we should say, 'Are you baptized?'" Are you baptized as a child of God, the way these little children were on the steps of the chancel this morning. We are all children of God. Baptized and not only forgiven, but by baptism equipped to forgive.

Many of you know that I was disappointed with the result of the football game last Thursday evening, the Bowl championship series where OU played Florida. I did hear something interesting before the game. Florida's coach was asked about waiting so long to play the game. He was asked if that was hard on him and his players. He said, "I'm glad we waited that extra week. If we had played a week earlier I don't think we would have had a chance. It gave some of our players a chance to heal and be able to play in the game." If you saw that game, you remember Florida's really good player was the quarterback, Tim Tebow. They had another good player named Percy Harvin, who might be their best player. He was certainly a good player in that game. OU was without a good player, DeMarco Murray.

Sadly, I see many Christians without their best player. They have forgotten the one who has said, "I will be with you no matter what." They

have forgotten to live down to their baptisms.

This Spring during the Lenten season before Easter, we will be baptizing some of these wonderful children you saw on the steps this morning. It will be a gift to them and it will be a gift to our church. We will be reminded of our own baptisms when we see their baptisms. Maybe, just maybe, something else will happen. If we listen closely, we might hear, "This is my beloved. With thee I am well pleased." If we watch closely, we just might see the dove of Christ's peace. If that happens, we can join with Otis and say, "Praise the Lord! He's done it again." Amen.