

Remember Your Baptism
Romans 6:1-5
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I remember the first baptism I performed as a student minister. It was for Billy, who was a member of my junior high youth group. I'm sure there was something good about Billy, but I had trouble finding it. Billy was not really into church, he only came to youth because his parents made him, and he was a constant thorn in my flesh. Based on his behavior, I think God was using Billy to prove to me that evil really does exist in our world.

And yet, when the time came, much to my surprise, Billy presented himself for baptism. He descended the steps into the water and placed himself in front of me, and after I made up a few nice things to say about him, I slowly lowered Billy into the water. They say that a person will commit to believing anything if you hold them under water long enough. Moved by what I'm sure was the Holy Spirit, I held Billy under there for just a few seconds longer, figuring God needed the extra time to do some work. I'm happy to report Billy is now an Eagle Scout and an upstanding member of society. I'd like to think those few extra seconds had something to do with that.

Does baptism have that kind of power? Can it change an evil spirit into an Eagle Scout? Baptism is one of the most meaningful and controversial practices of the Christian church. There are multiple understandings of when to do it, how to do it, and what it means when it's done. The Bible is crystal clear in some areas and frustratingly vague in others. Our own denominational tradition has tried to sort things out, but we are still left with widely different views that serve to distinguish between different kinds of Christians instead of uniting them together.

In our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we don't talk a lot about sacraments. That's a term usually reserved for the Catholic church, which has seven sacraments: baptism, communion, confirmation, marriage, reconciliation (which includes confession), holy orders (which is like ordination), and anointing of the sick.

In our denomination, we recognize only two sacraments: communion and baptism. And we understand a sacrament to be an outward expression of an inward belief. So, when we come to the communion table, we are simply taking what we believe inwardly (our faith in Christ as our savior) and expressing it outwardly by taking the bread and the cup.

Same thing with baptism. We are taking an inward belief (a desire to commit our lives to Jesus Christ) and expressing it outwardly by being baptized. In a sense, baptism is confirmation of our inward belief, that we are God's children. That's what Jesus experienced when he was baptized. The dove descends, and he hears the voice of his Father stating, "You are my son, with whom I am well-pleased." At that moment, Jesus knows exactly who he is.

And it is through Jesus' baptism that we know who we are, as well. Paul reminds us in Romans that, through baptism, we die, just like Christ died. We don't literally die, although Billy was starting to turn blue when I brought him up out of the waters. We die to our old self, our sinful self, our self that has forgotten that we are called to be children of God. But we don't stay dead. When we come out of the waters, we rise to our new self.

This was played out in the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" These three escaped convicts come across a group of people in the woods who are wearing white robes and singing like angels. The convicts follow the people and realize they are heading to a river for a baptism, so one of the convicts gets in line. After he gets dunked, he tells his friends that the minister told

him after he was baptized that all his sins had been washed away, including the time he stole a pig and got caught. His friend says, "But you said you were innocent of that." "Well, I lied...and that's been washed away, too!"

To be baptized is to be simultaneously judged and redeemed. When we are baptized, we confess the sin that lives within us and are sentenced to death in the water, only to be resurrected and redeemed into new life by God. Author Nick Taylor writes, "The water of baptism is the amniotic fluid of the Kingdom of God. As the child emerges from the mother's womb into a totally different world, so a newly baptized person emerges from a world of sin and death into a world of grace and truth."

Through baptism, we are fundamentally changed, we are marked for life. Baptism means our life is no longer ours; it now belongs to God. We are given a new identity, we are claimed fully and completely by God. Notice, in the baptism passage, as Jesus came to be baptized no one knew who he was. No one was calling him the Messiah, he had no disciples following him. But when he came up out of the water, God gave named his new identity: You are My son, whom I love.

In the Disney movie, "The Lion King," the lion Simba, after living in exile with Timon and Pumba, eating grubworms and singing "Hakuna Matata," is called to return to his homeland and rescue it from his evil uncle. Simba resists, thinking he's responsible for his father's death. The baboon Rafiki tells Simba that his father is alive and can take Simba to him. The baboon leads Simba to a pool of water, and tells him to look in. Simba glances in quickly, expecting to see his father, but instead sees only himself. "Look closer," says Rafiki. "Your father is in you." As Simba looks again, the image of his father comes to the surface of the water. "See?" says Rafiki. "You have forgotten who you are, you are more than you have become. Remember who you are..."

Remember who you are. You are loved beyond measure by the God who created you, who formed you, who will go to any lengths to bring you back from exile. God created you, and through baptism God recreates you. If you have been baptized, even it was as an infant and you can't remember it, you can claim this promise. If you haven't been baptized, I'd love to talk to you about that, about what it means to be claimed by God. When we look in the waters of baptism, we remember who we are.

Today, in our second service, we'll baptize four of our youth who have chosen to give their lives to Jesus Christ. For those who don't know, in our denomination's tradition, we practice what's called believer's baptism by full immersion. We don't practice infant baptism (although we accept it) because we believe people should make a conscious choice to be baptized. The typical age of people getting baptized is around 12 or 13 and is usually preceded by some sort of discipleship class, which helps the young people get grounded in the basics of Christian faith. The class, which we just finished, culminates in the baptism of the students and their joining of the church.

I think that class is a great way to lead into baptisms, but here's what we have to all be careful of. Baptism does not mark the end of something; as with Jesus, it marks the beginning of something. Another way to say this is that baptism is not the destination, but the first step of the journey, a journey with God through your life and faith. If we are baptized, and then we live in such a way that doesn't demonstrate that we've been fundamentally transformed by the grace of God, we're committing the ultimate offense against God: we're forgetting who we are.

The great reformer Martin Luther once said, “Remember your baptism, and be glad.” I used to resent that phrase, because I can’t remember my baptism. I was baptized as an infant in the Catholic church. But I don’t think Luther meant to remember the act; he meant to remember the promises that were made, remember the covenant that was sealed made, and then live your life as what you have been claimed as: a child of God who has died to sin with Christ in his death and been raised to new life with him through his resurrection.

Through baptism we are claimed, but we are also called. We come up out of those waters a new person with a new purpose. Paul says in Romans, “We were therefore buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Through our baptisms, we are made clean and anointed to serve. Whether we are ministers or mathematicians, accountants or attorneys, stockbrokers or stay-home moms, pilots or professors, consultants or cashiers, God has placed a call on our hearts through our baptism, a call to live a life of service to God and love for others. We are identified as God’s beloved and sent to do holy work in this world. Because of our baptism, we are made new, and that fact should influence every thought and decision in our life.

Of course, it doesn’t. We forget so easily, don’t we? We forget that we are claimed and called, and instead live as if we are still controlled by the sin within us. We say hurtful words, we make bad choices, we live selfishly. We forget. But today, I want to encourage you to remember. Remember your baptism and be glad. Remember that God said, “You are my child, with whom I am well pleased.” Remember that, at some point in your life, you made promises or promises were made on your behalf that inextricably connects you to the God of the cosmos, the God of the ages, the God we know through Jesus Christ. You are God’s child, and God is so very pleased with you. “You have forgotten who you are, you are more than you have become. Remember who you are.”