

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 5:1-8
July 25, 2017

United with Christ

Yesterday – just less than 24 hours ago – I stood by that baptismal font, poured water into it, and repeated the words Andra read a few minutes ago:

*When we were baptized in Christ Jesus,
we were baptized into his death.
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,
so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might live a new life.
For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

The occasion, as most of you know – for many of you were there – was the Service of Witness to the Resurrection for our sister Mary Jane Mayo. The words I spoke by that font are not mine, of course. They are words penned by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. Paul is doing his best in this 5th chapter of his epistle to get it through the heads of those hard-headed Romans that to become a Christian is to be granted a fresh start, a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. More than that, to live the Christian life is live in gratitude for the gift of grace that makes that new life possible.

Following Mary Jane's service, the congregation moved over to the Westminster Room to enjoy food, to console one another, and to greet John and his family. As I was munching a pimento cheese sandwich with the crusts cut off, a friend of Mary Jane's came up to me and said, "What was that business with the water you did when the service began? I've never seen that done before. What was that all about?"

"Well," I said, "It's our way of reminding ourselves who we are. We are sinners saved by grace. We are children claimed as God's own forever. We are those who do not fear death because we have already died with Christ and been raised to new life with him."

“Oh,” she said. That’s all she said, but the look on her face was saying, “Now is a good time to get away from this guy and find myself a cup of punch.”

I know it seems strange. And explanations over pimento cheese sandwiches and shortbread might not be the best setting for discussing complicated theological ideas. But baptism is important – *foundational* you might say. It’s how we Christians know who we are.

For those early Christians back in Paul’s day, a burning issue was how to get right with God – how to make one’s self acceptable before a holy and righteous God. For the Jewish Christians in the Roman church, the means of making oneself acceptable to God was obedience to the Jewish law. Jewish Christians wanted their Gentile brothers and sisters to follow the same path. They wanted the males of the community to be circumcised, and all the folks in the church family to stick to the Jewish dietary laws.

But Paul argued that, no matter how strictly you follow the law – no matter how hard you work at making yourself acceptable – you’ll never get there because everyone is a sinner who falls short of God’s glory. Nobody measures up. Nobody makes the cut. Jew or Gentile – in the end it doesn’t matter. And there’s no point in judging others because you, yourself, are doing the same things you condemn others for doing. According to Paul, all of us are “sinners.”

People these days don’t tend to speak in terms of “sin” and “sinner.” But they know what it’s like to live under the pressure of unattainable expectations. They know what it’s like to work for a boss who’s never satisfied, to strive for a goal that keeps shifting beyond their reach, to try and fail to be the perfect student, the perfect spouse, the perfect achiever of the American dream.

Last year, Mattel, the company that manufactures the Barbie doll, decided to re-configure Barbie’s dimensions. Parents and psychologists had been complaining that the stick-thin Barbie with her generous bodice and impossibly long legs was sending the wrong message to little girls, because – let’s face it – real women don’t look like that. Now Barbie comes in four body types and, and for the first time in 53 years, is able to wear flats as well as heels.

I doubt that a more full-figured dress-up doll will keep little girls from feeling overwhelmed by the expectations laid on them by our competitive, consumerist culture, but I suppose it's a step in the right direction.

(Now, if they could just redesign Ken without the six pack, maybe I wouldn't feel compelled to go to the gym every day.)

All of us fall short. None of us makes the grade. Not morally, not physically, not spiritually. We all fall short of God's best hopes for us. In one way or another, we have all broken God's heart. ". . . **there is no distinction,**" Paul insists, "**since all have fallen short of the glory of God . . .**" (Romans 3:23).

For Paul, the problem is sin. And although that term has lost much of its weight, the problem itself remains. We don't measure up. We fall short of the mark. We are not worthy to come before a holy God.

When, at the age of twelve, I stood before the congregation of Beacon Hill Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, and took my vows of membership with the other members of the communicants' class, the first question the minister asked us was, "Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving God's displeasure and without hope save in God's sovereign mercy?"

"I do," I replied. My father was the minister. What else could I have said? But as the years go by, I find that, even if my answer was less than well informed, it was most certainly true. I am a sinner. I do deserve God's displeasure. I am without hope save in God's sovereign mercy.

Is that not also true of you?

Having stripped his readers of any pretense of worthiness, Paul then proclaims to them the wonder of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God. God has borne within God's heart of love all the hurt, the pain, and the harm we have done to one another and to ourselves. In Christ, God carried that heavy weight right up to the cross with him, and when he died on the cross, that terrible burden was lifted forever. As Paul put it, "**God proves his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" (Romans 5:8).

Paul is talking about you and me. He's talking about the cross and how it is the sign of a love "so amazing, so divine," that it demands "my soul, my life, my all." To be baptized is to die along with Christ, and to be raised to new life with him.

That's why, when death threatens to tear us away from the Christ who died for us, when we are so weighed down with grief over the loss of someone we love, when we are close to losing heart and forgetting who we are, we pour water in the font and we hear Paul telling us,

*When we were baptized in Christ Jesus,
we were baptized into his death.
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,
so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might live a new life.
For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

So, last Friday, as our sister Jean Lee was taking her last breaths, we gathered with her beloved friend June Stewart and with several members of Jean's family, round her bed, and we said to her,

Jean, our sister in the faith,
we entrust you to God who created you.
May you return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth.
Surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses beyond time and space,
may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life.

May Christ, the Lord of glory,
who was crucified for you,
bring you freedom and peace.

May Christ, the High Priest,
who has forgiven all your sins,
keep you among his people.

May Christ, the Son of God,
who died for you,
show you the glories of his kingdom,

May Christ the Good Shepherd,
enfold you with his tender care.
May you see your Redeemer face to face,
and enjoy the sight of God for ever.

- Book of Common Worship

We are sinners saved by grace, you and I. We have died to sin and we have already been raised to new life. There are other ways to say it, but the old language still speaks.

And so, we pour water into the font, and we remember who we are. Then we lift our heads, throw back our shoulders, stand tall, and we say “Thanks be to God.”

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