

12th Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 12, 2018

Living Baptism

In these days, when “contemporary worship” is all the rage, it’s good to remember that every time Christians gather to worship the Triune God, they are tapping into a tradition that goes all the way back to the first century and beyond. In the strictest sense, Christian worship is never *merely* “contemporary.”

It doesn’t matter how many projector screens you have in the “auditorium.” It doesn’t matter how many guitars and drum sets are on the “stage.” It doesn’t matter that the leader of worship is wearing jeans and has the requisite tattoos. You just can’t be Christian without connecting to “the old, old story of Jesus and his love.”

That connection to the Apostolic tradition and the saints who have gone before us is particularly plain today, both in what we are about to do and in what you just heard read from the Bible. In a few minutes, Ruben Diaz and Stephen Sandon will re-connect, as it were, with their baptisms, and as they do, we will re-connect with ours. We do this every Sunday when you see me stand at that font, hear the water splash, and receive these words, “In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.”

Remember how Christ died for you? Remember how you were buried with him in baptism? Remember how you were raised to new life with the risen Christ through these waters?

What? You don’t remember? You were just a baby at the time? Well, today’s your opportunity to remember who you are, who knit you together in your mother’s womb, who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. You don’t have to recall the actual event to remember your baptism. Every time you see this font, you are reminded. In other words, your baptism, even if it was enacted long ago, becomes “contemporary.”

Stephen was baptized in the state of Kansas by a Methodist bishop named Dana Dawson. Stephen was a one-year-old at the time. Ruben was baptized in Ostuncalco, Guatemala in the *Iglesia Evangélica Nacional Presbiteriana de Guatemala*.

Natives of Ostuncalco where Ruben was baptized speak an indigenous language called “Mam.” Natives of Kansas, where Stephen was baptized, speak an indigenous language called “Kansan” which is a dialect of English.

The language spoken doesn’t really matter. What matters is this: Promises were made, water flowed, and somebody said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God’s people saw it happen, and they said “Amen!” (Or “Ah-men,” or however you say it in Guatemala or Kansas.

Promises. Water. The name of the Triune God. Those are the basic elements. Add the Holy Spirit, and you have baptism.

Round about the time our Epistle lesson was written, candidates for baptism would wade into a stream or a pool, naked as the day they were born. They'd face the west as somebody asked, "Do you renounce the Devil and all his ways?"

"I do renounce them," the candidates would say.

Then the presider would ask, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and will you follow him?"

The candidates would then face east, in the direction of resurrection, and say, "I do, and I will."

Then they'd come out of the water, put on a new white robe, drink some milk and honey, the food of the Promised Land, and join God's people at the table of our Lord.

The modern rite printed in the front of the hymnal is a bit simpler and tends to use less water, but the dynamic is the same. Today Ruben and Stephen, who have already been walking in the light for a long time, affirm or re-affirm the faithfulness of the God who called them in their baptisms.

Baptism should make a difference, not because it confers a lofty status or inoculates us from the challenges of living in the world, but because it signifies our entrance into the community of the baptized, otherwise known as the church. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians expects the members of that community formed by these waters to behave differently from those who have not taken the plunge.

For one thing, they are to be honest with one another. **"Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."**

Apparently, truth-telling was a rare occurrence back in those early days of the church. That was two thousand years before Facebook, Twitter, and internet trolls. Back then, people couldn't re-tweet a nasty rumor about their sister or brother in the church, but they could whisper a lie behind a neighbor's back. A lie couldn't go viral back then, but it could cut to the quick.

"We'll have none of that!" the writer says, not because truth-telling is a virtue, but because Christians belong to one another. If you lie to a sister or brother in Christ, you're lying to yourself, too.

“Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

A lot of demonic mischief can go on when anger is unresolved or suppressed. As any pastor knows, there is no aggression quite like passive aggression. Better to speak up than to bury your rage – far better to go to your brother or sister and have a wee chat than to nurse a grudge that could last a lifetime.

Turning to the thieves in the audience, the writer says, “Now that you’re baptized, you’ll have to give up thieving.” Why? Because through honest work, you’ll have something to share with the needy.

The writer isn’t interested in scolding people for who they were or what they did before they entered the community of God’s love. He wants people to understand that the purpose of work is not to build up wealth for yourself. Work, for this writer, is an avenue for service to others. If you work honestly, he insists, then you’ll have something to share with the needy.

Vocational choices for Christians, this passage suggests, should not be made based on the fattest paycheck, the highest status, or the most comfortable lifestyle, but on how what we do for a living enriches the lives of others.

The writer goes on to talk about speech that builds up, rather than tears down, about words that convey grace instead of malice, about putting away wrangling and slander. And then he comes to what, for me is the heart of this extraordinary baptismal ethic: **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”**

These days, it seems to me that what is missing from our chatrooms, our blogs, our political debates, and our conversations online and off, is simple *kindness*. Not soppy sentimentality, but willingness to forgive one another for the failures and foibles that are part and parcel of the human condition. We are missing kindness rooted in empathy for the other. Having gorged ourselves on a steady diet of contempt and vitriol, you and I are starved for tenderheartedness born out of the pain our own hearts have endured.

The writer prompts the baptized to consider what it costs God to forgive us, to ponder God’s own vulnerability, and to follow suit. **“Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ has loved us and gave himself for us . . .”**

No doubt, we are all aware of ways in which Christians have fallen short of this baptismal ethic. The writer of Ephesians is not naïve. He knows that we Christians do not always imitate God in our dealings with one another.

But for more than 32 years now, I have observed this particular gathering of the baptized in action, and I can tell you that the writer of Ephesians would recognize his words alive in you. I have seen countless ways in which you have been **kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.**

I have seen you bear with that brother who seldom says “thank you,” with that sister who complains constantly, with those saints who are seldom saintly.

I have witnessed your kindness to the outcast, your welcome of the stranger, your hospitality to the hostile.

If the writer of Ephesians were to wander into this church today, he’d see the font, he’d look at you, and he’d say, “I know who you are! You are God’s beloved children. You are the baptized, the imitators of God. You are living out the old, old story, and the Spirit is alive in you.

Remember your baptism, beloved. Look around and see how to live the life of the baptized.