

Article of Faith: Baptism
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Matthew 3: 13 - 17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Ephesians 4: 1 - 16

1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

9 (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Today is a good day. A very, very good day. Worship. Singing. Sabbath. Baptism. Word. *“This is the day that the Lord has made.”*

Molly Speilman has taken baptism vows on behalf of her daughter, Lilly.

You have taken vows as the congregation.

It is not the first time for this sacrament, of course. They stand in a long line of vows that have been made for babies, for children, for adults. Combined with water and prayer, word and witness.

Vows you made or were made for you, vows you have taken for a child of your own. Vows you have witnessed. And vows we have all made as a part of the congregation. So much more than contracts, they are covenants, bound by the rule of love.¹

Vows that don't ever get old, or stale and are always deeply emotional and moving. Vows that are just one reason I always carry a handkerchief in my pocket.

Baptism is one of the two events described as sacraments in the Presbyterian church, why it is an article of faith for this summer's sermon series. A sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible grace. Frederick Buechner says, “A sacrament is when something holy happens. It is transparent time, time you can see through to something deep inside time.”

In the Presbyterian Church we choose two things to be sacraments, baptism and communion, because they are things that Jesus did, and things that Jesus told us to do. GO and baptize.

Do this in remembrance of me.

The two rituals that are uniquely Christian, though they both, also, carry aspects of the Jewish faith from which Christianity was born.

It doesn't mean that other things aren't important, or holy, In writing about sacraments Frederick Buechner goes on to say, Needless to say, church isn't the only place where the holy happens. Sacramental moments can occur at any moment, at any place, and to anybody. Watching something get born.... love. A walk on the beach. Somebody coming to see you when you're sick. A meal with people you love. Looking into a stranger's eyes and finding out they are not a stranger's. If we weren't blind as bats, we might see that life itself is sacramental.

As Christians, we have such a deep reaction to baptism because we know just what a profound gift this is, to be bound together, to walk together, as a family of faith, *“joined and knit together,”* the letter says.

¹ Volf, Miraslov. “Married Love.” In *The Christian Century*. June 5, 2002.

Giving primacy to the will of God, the lessons of Jesus Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

As former president of Auburn Theological Seminary, Barbara Wheeler, said and taught:² "Baptism is not a chummy bonding with those with whom we would naturally gather in clubs. It is a cold shower, not a bubble-bath. ... It is not an easy process ... It joins us in Christ to those with whom we have few if any interests, background characteristics, preferences or opinions in common. It breaks down the barriers that divide, making people who can't stand each other fellow citizens and members of the household of God, because Christ died for all of them - and us."

The words we share at baptism aren't all hearts and flowers, because life isn't all hearts and flowers.

We have baptism to hold us together and to keep us reaching outward to see who else needs a hand.

You might have heard, a few years ago, about Lauren Hill. About a basketball game in which she played earlier this month and scored four points.

This is how ESPN reported it³:

The first basket of the 2014-15 college basketball season went, fittingly, to Lauren Hill of Division III Mount St. Joseph.

Hill, a freshman with inoperable brain cancer, took a pass in the post and hit a left-handed layup just 17 seconds into Sunday's game against Hiram College. The NCAA allowed the schools to move the game up two weeks in the hope Hill would be healthy enough to play. In September, doctors told her she has only a few months to live.

"I never thought I would play on a college court, put my feet on the floor and feel the vibration of the crowd," Hill said after the game, which the Mount won 66-55. "This game has been amazing, and everything that happened today was amazing. This is a really good day."

There is, of course, more to the story than this. Of the practices Lauren refused to miss. Of the 10,000 fans that showed up to see Lauren play, about 9,900 more than are normally present to see Mount St. Joseph play, but when people heard about Lauren's story they wanted to be there to support her. And the game had to be moved to Xavier University's stadium to accommodate the crowd.

² <http://archive.wfn.org/1999/11/msg00139.html>

³ http://espn.go.com/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/11809823/lauren-hill-mount-st-josephs-brain-tumor-fulfills-hoops-dream

Lauren pushing her body to stay and cheer on her team, even when she wasn't playing.

What did Hill think about all of this? In her own words, "To reach and touch this many people is amazing," Hill said. "Not many people knew about DIPG [the rare pediatric cancer from which she suffers] before me, and now that they do, we can get research going to cure this cancer. I won't be around to see that, but it's going to help so many people. That's why the support can't end with this game."

Not only has the support not ended, but Lauren hasn't quit, either. She played in another game on Friday night, was able to be in the game for one play, and made the third basket of her college career.⁴

Those are the promises we make this day Bill and Betsey, Heidi, Jackie, and Renee. Molly and you and me and all of us.

That each child of God, You among them, would know that, when they need it, there is a stadium of support at the ready.

For we know that some of the children we baptize will play the parts of Lauren's friends and teammates. And some will play the part of Lauren herself. Because we know this we proclaim, in baptism, that in life and in death, we belong to God and to each other.

These are not idle words. They are a promise to live into the truth of God's good news and just one of the reasons why, barring extraordinary circumstances, baptisms are a part of worship. A part of the normal gathering of the community of faith in which God's word is read and proclaimed.

We don't know what role Lilly or Suzanne, Braham or Andrew will play in the world, it's our commitment, in baptism, to help prepare them to answer the call to the vocation God will place before them.

Paul uses the language of his time, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, language that the people would have understood to apply to each of them, all of them. Today we might call them activists, care givers, line leaders, and tutors.

They aren't jobs, they are ministries, and we all have a calling. We all have a role to play in the Body of Christ.

How do we make and keep these fearsome promises?

⁴ http://espn.go.com/womens-college-basketball/story/_/id/11917013/lauren-hill-mount-st-joseph-lions-plays-second-game-versus-bethany-college-scores-layup

By faith, my friends, by faith, together.

By practicing our own baptisms, with each and every step of our own lives. Accepting a hand and help up. Offering your hand to help someone else along.

And walking, side by side. The words of this letter do not establish an expectation of perfection, but are an exhortation to intentionality.

Gathering, frequently, at the table, for the nourishment we need for the journey ahead. One baptism, frequent communion.

These are the promises we make to live into our baptisms.

A once-in-a-lifetime sacrament.

A for-your-whole-lifetime commitment.

As we heard a few moments ago:

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

The sacrament of baptism

A once-in-a-lifetime sacrament.

A for-your-whole-lifetime commitment.

A reminder that while we might be tempted to view baptism as a mountain-top-summit-moments, each step is a step of faith.

National geographic photographer Cory Richards wrote the other day on an Instagram post with his photo of a couple wading over a bridge with mountains in the background, “The funny thing about alpine climbing in remote corners of the world is how little time you spend in the mountain, how impactful that time is...but also how much time you spend walking...approaching and walking away...”⁵

⁵ http://websta.me/p/851181444370880218_787132 Natgeo on Instagram, November 11, 2014



“Baptism,” writes professor Scott Haldeman, “is not an end but a beginning, a doorway through which we pass to begin a journey. While the journey follows a path that is sure, since it has already been blazed by the Crucified and Risen One—its twists and turns, its bright slopes and shadowy valleys, its meanderings by still waters and its bridgeless crossings of swollen rivers become known to us only as we walk along.”

As we walk along....

We are taught in this letter, first sent to the church in Ephesus, the way a Christian walks is with *“humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”*

What would be different in your life if you set these qualities as your baseline?

If you’ve watched anything on TV this week in the arena of current issues. If you’ve read the local paper or followed local politics on facebook, you know that we can’t look to others to live these things, we must start here. With you. With me. With us. We must lead the way.

Is this a huge idealistic vision? Yes. But baptism, the promises God makes and the promises we make are that idealistic, and more.

They are gifts we must cultivate ourselves in order to share.

Finally, I invite you to consider that when these words were written to the church in Ephesus, they weren’t intended to be a scolding or introduction of new material. They were the spiritual equivalent of “You Go Girl” or “Atta Boy.” Thanking God for all those in that community of faith that were taking their baptismal vows seriously. Just as you take those vows seriously.

And I ask you to consider, to ask yourself, in the days ahead, how are you living into, cultivating, your baptism?

How are you keeping the baptismal vows you’ve made for others?

How is baptism an article of faith in your own life, and in the life of this community? This church?

Church, which Barbara Wheeler describes as:

“strangers, who cling to each other for dear life in the same chilly, rocky baptismal boat because we are headed toward the same destination: a better country... *The church is better*

off -- more productive and more faithful -- when the strangers in it hold on to one another”⁶

A one-oared boat is destined to go in circles.

A full complement of rowers, bound and knit together, is able to follow where Christ leads.

On this Sunday we remember the kind of Kingdom that Christ embodied and in which Christ wanted us to live. A kingdom of justice and hope, health and peace, joy and thanksgiving.

*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him
who is the head, into Christ,
from whom the whole body, joined and knit together.*

And so we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Why Liberals Need Conservatives” in *The Christian Century*, January 13, 2004, pp. 18-20.