

**Matthew 3:13-17**

**Ephesians 4:1-16**

**April 15, 2018**

***The Sacrament of Baptism***

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Did you hear about the man who was stranded alone on a desert island for twenty years? One day he noticed a speck on the horizon. As it got bigger, he realized it was a rescue boat. When the boat reached shore, two men hopped out. One of them said, "We saw the smoke from your fire. We knew this island was supposed to be deserted, so we thought we would check it out. C'mon, let's go, you're rescued!" When the island man hesitated, his rescuer said, "C'mon! Didn't you hear me? We've come to rescue you."

The island man said, "Yeah, that's great. But, you see, I've lived here for twenty years. I'd like to show you around my island before I leave." The two rescuers shrugged and said, "Okay. Lead the way." The island man led them through the dense foliage until they reached a clearing. The rescuers saw three thatch-roofed huts. They asked, "What are those?" The island man proudly said, "The one in the middle is my house. The one on the left is where I go to church." One of the rescuers asked, "What's the other one?" The island man said, "That's where I used to go to church."

Not long before we moved to Wallace, our church in Roanoke Rapids, NC helped host the meeting of the Presbytery of New Hope. A minister friend who had been asked to preach at the presbytery worship service called me and asked, "Phil, I don't know the folks in your area very well. Would they be offended by my sermon title?" I asked Jim, "What is it?" and he said, "The Hell There Ain't!" "Tell me more," I said.

Jim said, "I want to tell the story about a man visiting a town for the first time. He was out walking around downtown when he noticed two very large churches on opposite corners of Main Street. Strangely, the churches were of the same denomination. The man was puzzled how this could be. He stopped a passerby and asked, 'Are you from around here?' The man said yes, so the stranger asked if he could explain about the two churches of the same denomination on opposite corners. The town native just shook his head and said, 'Well, you see, years ago, that church split. The folks in that church over there said, 'There ain't no hell!' and the folks in this church here said, 'The hell there ain't!'" I told Jim, "That'll preach!"

Those are funny stories, but sadly all too true. Apparently it was even true of the church when Paul wrote his letters to the first Christian congregations. Listen again to what he wrote to the Ephesian Christians: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Paul's letters can typically be divided into two parts. He usually deals with his theology in the first part of his letters, then he applies what he has said to life in the church and the behavior expected of believers. As one person has put it, Paul gives a theological rationale for the behavior that is required of the church. The letter to the Ephesians is a good example of that letter writing pattern. In the first three chapters of the letter, Paul writes about the spiritual blessings in Christ, the believer's release from death to life because of Christ's resurrection from the dead, and the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross. Paul also prays throughout for the believers who are reading his letter.

Chapter 4 begins with the signal word, "Therefore . . ." which points us back to everything Paul has already said. In other words, because you have spiritual blessings in Christ, because Christ's resurrection from the dead has freed you from death, because the enmity between Jew and Gentile has been put to death in Christ's death on the cross, **therefore** . . . this is how you are to live as followers of Jesus Christ!

This day of celebration, as we baptize Rowan Wayne Casteen, is a good time to reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. In a sense, each of our lives is like one of Paul's letters. We can say what we believe about God and Jesus and the resurrection from the dead, and then we can figure out what that means for how we are going to live our lives.

Our Affirmation of Faith in the baptismal service this morning was very short, taken directly from today's epistle lesson. It has been suggested that these few words are an early Christian baptismal credo. Newly baptized believers would use the words to affirm their faith, as a theological rationale for the behavior required of them. Listen again to what we affirmed: "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." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Notice the repetition of the word "one" — **one** body, **one** Spirit, **one** hope of your calling, **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism. And all of these are held together by the **one** God and Father of all. These are the basic elements of a Christian confession of faith. They remind us of what we hold in common as believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

As Grayson and Ashton bring Rowan for baptism this morning, we have the opportunity to remember our own baptismal vows and God's baptismal promises. When they answered the questions I asked them, Grayson and Ashton did not profess faith in Jesus Christ for Rowan. No one can profess faith for someone else. However, they did reaffirm God's promises in their own lives and they claimed those same promises for Rowan. Furthermore, Grayson and Ashton promised to set an example for their son by how they live because of what they believe. And Grayson and Ashton are not alone in this task. You, the congregation, also made promises to help Grayson and Ashton in the Christian nurture of Rowan and to "endeavor by your example and fellowship to strengthen Rowan's family ties with the household of God."

Whenever we sing "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love," I remember sitting around the big bonfire on Friday night at the closing worship service of our

church's week long Senior High summer retreat at Hard Labor Creek State Park in Rutledge, Georgia. There was such a sense of unity and love after we had spent a week living together, competing on the volleyball court and the softball field, worshiping together, and having lots of fun. Even though the Friday night worship service meant we had to pack up and leave the next morning, we all looked forward to that special time when we felt so close to one another.

If you look up Ephesians 4 in the Scriptural Index of our *Glory to God* hymnal, Hymn #300 is the first hymn listed: "We Are One in the Spirit" I don't know if Father Peter Scholtes, the author of the hymn, used Ephesians 4 as his inspiration for this hymn, but the first verse could be taken directly from today's Affirmation of Faith: "We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord; we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord, and we pray that all unity may one day be restored: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." The final verse is a majestic affirmation of our trinitarian faith: "All praise to the Father, from whom all things come, and all praise to Christ Jesus, God's only Son, and all praise to the Spirit, who makes us one: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

In the early 3rd century A.D., Tertullian was a church leader in the northern African city of Carthage. He was a prolific writer of Christian theology, the first author to write Christian works extensively in Latin. He is well known for his defense of Christianity — particularly the way Christians lived and acted — against criticisms and misunderstandings from the surrounding society.

If Tertullian had known about Hymn #300, he might just have written those words as his defense. But, predating that hymn by about 1700 years, Tertullian wrote, "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See how they love one another, they say, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, they say, for they themselves will sooner put to death." (*The Apology*, Ch. 39)

At Wednesday night's Confirmation Class, Arnie Young gave us a tour of the Helping Hands Food Pantry. He explained how the food pantry is stocked and managed, and how people are served. Then he had the class members help pack bags for distribution. Before Arnie arrived, we read and talked about three different Bible passages, from James 2, Matthew 25, and 1 John 4. All three passages had the same message: What good is it to say you have faith in God/Jesus Christ if you never put it into action?

In a sense, that's part of the message of baptism today. Although Rowan is too young to understand and remember what happens here today, he can be reminded and taught that he was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And we can help Grayson and Ashton teach and remind Rowan of what it means to live out your baptism, to put our faith into action.

Baptism offers each of us the opportunity to reaffirm our own baptismal vows, whether we made them ourselves or the promises were claimed on our behalf. Here are the questions asked of someone who is making a public profession of faith. Notice

how they are twofold: the theological rationale for the behavior that is required of the believer.

\* Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

\* Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

\* Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

\* Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

That last question echoes Paul's begging the Ephesian believers "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." It is a life of humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, love, peace, and unity. It is a life that is based on what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

From 1618 - 1648, Europe was embroiled in the bloody Thirty Years War. Religious differences played a major role in the conflict. A relatively unknown German Lutheran theologian named Rupertus Meldenius wrote a tract on Christian unity in the midst of this terrible conflict. In his tract, he wrote these words that clearly lay out a good way for the church and believers to live out our baptismal identities: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity/love."

As we celebrate baptism with Rowan Wayne Casteen and his family today, and as we remember our own baptisms and rededicate ourselves to living in love and unity, hear these words of blessing:

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."<sup>1</sup>

***Let us pray: Eternal Father, at the baptism of Jesus you revealed him to be your Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit faithful to their calling as your people; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mark Ross, "In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity," [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org).