

Matthew 3:13-17

Romans 5:1-11

June 18, 2017

The Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina

WHILE WE STILL WERE SINNERS

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.

President Calvin Coolidge was known for his conservatism and frugality in his governing, his personal life, and his speech and conversation. His wife, Grace Goodhue Coolidge, remembered the time that the President was seated next to a young woman at a dinner party. The young woman told the President she had made a bet that she could get the President to utter at least three words in a conversation. The President didn't even look at the young woman as he quietly replied, "You lose."¹

The Democrats in the 1920's liked to tell the story about President Coolidge attending worship one Sunday. His wife was not able to go with him. When the President came home, she asked him if the preacher's sermon was good. Characteristically, the President tersely replied, "Yes." Mrs. Coolidge wanted to know if she had missed anything important, so she asked, "What was his sermon about?" The President replied, "Sin." "Well," she asked, "what did he say about sin?" President Coolidge said, "He was against it."²

Well, who wouldn't be? Against sin, that is. At least, against **other** people's sins! I recently heard a preacher say that we too often confess other people's sins instead of our own. We may be against sin, just as the President's preacher was, but we find ourselves caught up in sin, at least if we're honest with ourselves and, more important, honest with God. When I took the sticky-note to Cheryl on Thursday morning with my sermon title, she read it — "While We Still Were Sinners" — looked at me and said, "That's all of the time, isn't it?"

Do you remember the comic strip *For Better or For Worse*? For almost thirty years, Lynn Johnston told the story of the Patterson family of Millborough, Ontario in real time. Unique among comic strips, the Pattersons actually aged in real time. We watched as their children grew up, got married, and had families of their own. From time to time, Lynn Johnston wove religious observations into her cartoons, based on her own family experiences.

Describing the backstory of a scene between the mom, Elly, and her son, Michael, in a strip that appeared on April 1, 1983, Lynn Johnston writes, "These are the thoughts I had as I sat in church with my mother, listening to the Easter morning service. Our Anglican minister put a heavy focus on the death of Jesus and we were all made to feel responsible! 'It's because of YOU that he died! You are all SINNERS!!! YOU nailed Him to the cross!' I was eight years old and I thought . . . 'But, I wasn't there! I wasn't responsible! I wasn't even BORN yet!'"

In that particular cartoon, mom Elly finds 8-year-old Michael staring out the window, with a pensive look on his face. She asks, “Why are you looking so thoughtful, Michael?” With his head hung a little bit, Michael tells his mom, “I think it’s sad that Jesus died — that’s all.” Mom lifts his head up and tries to comfort him: “He had to die, honey. He died to save us all from our sins.” In the final frame, Michael points to himself and, with wide eyes, sincerely pleads, “But, Mom! — I haven’t done anything!!!”

Lynn Johnston gives us some more background on this particular cartoon: “This cartoon was done after Aaron and I had watched a movie together — I think it was ‘Ben Hur.’ He was so moved by the crucifixion that he wished he had been there to prevent it. It was an exceptional moment that we shared together and we talked about it for some time. This is one instance when I had an opportunity to talk about some really serious concepts with my son, and I hope I used it well.” She continues, “The concept of being born a sinner confused me. As a kid, I was unable to process this — it just didn’t make sense. I hoped in time I’d understand. I’m still waiting.”³

Can you identify with 8-year-old Michael’s anguish? The further along you get in life, the harder it is to make Michael’s claim — “I haven’t done anything!” — with any honesty at all. Still, when you consider what God did for us in Jesus’ death on the cross, you can be overwhelmed — either with guilt or with denial or with gratitude. We sing about it during the season of Lent, as we contemplate Jesus’ life and death:

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,
what wondrous love is this, O my soul!
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
to bear the dreadful curse for my soul!*

*When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down, sinking down,
when I was sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside his crown for my soul!⁴*

That is the good news of the gospel! That is the answer to sin! That is the hope we have in Jesus Christ! “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) The apostle Paul goes on to say, “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:10)

As we celebrate Richmond Henry Parker’s baptism this morning, we are reminded in a very visual way of God’s grace at work in our lives, while we still were sinners, even before we are aware of God’s grace. Before I put the water on Richmond’s head a few minutes ago, I looked at him and said, “Richmond Henry Parker, for you Jesus came into the world; for you he died and conquered death; all this he did for you, little one, though you know nothing of it as yet. We love because God first loved us.”

Richmond's baptism is a visible reminder of an invisible grace — that our sins are forgiven through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. I have no doubt that J and Joell have already told Richmond many times that God loves him. But how much can a five-month old baby boy comprehend about God's love and grace? For that matter, how much can any of us comprehend about God's amazing grace and love in Jesus Christ, who laid aside his crown for our souls?

1 John 3:1 assures us, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." It may have been a long, long time since you were five months old or eight years old, but you are still a child of God, saved by God's grace through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Perhaps you remember the date and event of your own baptism. I know I was baptized Mother's Day, May 13, 1956, but I only know that because my mom and dad told me about it. I was only three months and nine days old! But my baptism has played — and continues to play — a significant role in my life. My baptism reminds me that God loved me — God loves me — while I am still a sinner and, because Jesus traded his crown for my soul, I have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian theological doctrines are sometimes hard to grasp and understand, at least on an intellectual level. However, when we connect our theology with real-life events, we begin to get a better idea of what our relationship with God in Jesus Christ is all about.

For example, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation means that the pre-existent Son of God became man in Jesus. Think about the baby in the manger on Christmas.

Justification means "the exculpation of guilt or the demonstration of the correctness of an act or statement."⁵ In other words, "Get right with God!" as the highway billboard might warn you. But that's not something we can do on our own or even at all. Think about Good Friday and Easter Sunday, about a wooden cross on a hill and an empty tomb. Paul writes, "[Righteousness] will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." (Romans 4:24-25)

Then there is grace. It has been said that justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve, and grace is getting what we don't deserve. Even if we try to make our case like 8-year-old Michael — "But, Mom! — I haven't done anything!!!" — it's true that God's favor and forgiveness and reconciliation come to us despite everything we do in opposition to God's purpose and calling in our lives. The amazing thing about grace is, even before we were aware of God being at work in our lives, God was at work in our lives.

When I talk with parents before they present their child for the sacrament of baptism, I often share with them an article by Tom Walker about infant baptism called "It's all about grace." As we gather at the baptismal font this morning, remember our own baptisms, and hear Paul's words "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us," listen to Rev. Walker's thoughts:

“The overstuffed shoebox lay long forgotten in the back of a closet in my mother's apartment. I ran across it while looking for something else. When I opened the shoebox, out poured more than I ever could have imagined.

Inside were letters recording four years of correspondence (1958–62) between my parents and the North Carolina Children's Home Society, an adoption agency. The letters ended in February 1962—the month of my birth and my adoption. Four years of expectation and hassle, of yearning and hard work, of dutiful preparation and burgeoning excitement—all documented in that little shoebox.

Four years before I was even born, my parents were hard at work preparing a place for me. Even before I received my name, before I was baptized in our small Presbyterian church, before I could respond with the words “I love you,” my parents cared for me. In that shoebox was a history of love and grace that preceded any action on my part.

This discovery has given me an image to share with parents in the congregation where I am pastor, as we journey together toward the baptism of their children. Baptism is the church's celebration of the fact that God has “shoeboxes” for all of God's adopted children, meaning all of us. In infant baptism we visibly proclaim the central tenet of our Reformed faith: God's grace towards humanity.

When we baptize an infant we testify that God's grace acts on our behalf before we are capable of responding.”⁶

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for our souls . . . while we still were sinners.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift and grace in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Let us pray: Merciful God, you call us by name and promise to each of us your constant love. Deepen our understanding of the gospel. Strengthen our commitment to follow the way of Christ. Keep us in the faith and communion of your church. Increase our compassion for others. Help us to bear witness to your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Calvin Coolidge,” at www.whitehouse.gov

² Jack Smith, “Expanding on a Man of Few Words,” January 21, 1988, *Los Angeles Times* at www.articles.latimes.com.

³ *For Better or For Worse* at www.fborfw.com.

⁴American Folk Hymn, “What Wondrous Love Is This,” #215 in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

⁵John Reumann, “Justification,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p 520.

⁶Tom Walker, “What do Presbyterians Believe about infant Baptism? Infant baptism — it’s all about grace,” *Presbyterians Today* March 2006 at www.presbyterianmission.org