

Mark 10:35-45

Romans 6:1-14

March 8, 2015

Third Sunday in Lent

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

The Crosses of Lent

**A BIRTH CERTIFICATE, A DEATH CERTIFICATE,
AND A BAPTISMAL CERTIFICATE**

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.

A few weeks before we baptize a baby here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, our church secretary, Cheryl, calls Kathy Walker with the child's full name, his or her date of birth, and the parents' names. In turn, Kathy prepares a beautiful gift from the Presbyterian Women that is given to the parents on the day of baptism — a scallop shell with three pearls inside. The scallop shell has been a symbol of baptism for centuries. In some churches, the baptismal font is designed to look like a scallop shell or has a scallop shell attached. In some traditions, the minister or priest pours the waters of baptism on the child's head from a scallop shell.

After I baptize a child, I present the parents with the gift from the Presbyterian Women and a baptismal certificate that certifies that the child received Christian baptism on a particular day. The certificate contains the child's name, the parents' names, the date and place of birth, the date and location of baptism, and signatures of witnesses and the presiding minister. Sometimes, maybe not so much these days as in the past, people use baptismal certificates or church records to verify a date of birth because no birth certificate was issued.

When we talked about baptism in Confirmation 2015 a couple of weeks ago, I showed the young people the church record book that contains the names of church members, including baptized children. We found their names, even if they weren't baptized here at Wallace Presbyterian. The information is pretty much the same as on the baptismal certificate — the child's name, date of birth, parents' name, date and place of baptism, and the minister's name.

When someone is baptized, it is a time of joy and for celebration. When a baby is baptized in our church, there is a feeling of hope and promise and sweetness. When I carry the baby down the aisle and introduce you as his or her church family, I can see the smiles on your faces. It's a happy time in the life of our church when someone is baptized.

Wouldn't it be jarring, then, if I held a baby in my arms, put water on the baby's head, and said, "Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," only to turn to the parents and present them with a

cross and a death certificate for the child? Just saying and hearing those words is uncomfortable, outrageous, perhaps even offensive.

But listen again to how the apostle Paul describes baptism into Christ: “We who have died to sin, how can we still live in it? Or do you not know that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also in the same way we might live in newness of life. For if we have become united in the likeness of his death, we will also become united in the likeness of his resurrection.” (Romans 6:2-5, personal translation) We sang Paul’s words in our opening hymn: “Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit, dead in the tomb with Christ our King; one with his rising, freed and forgiven, thankfully now God’s praises we sing.”

William Willimon is the Professor of the Practice of Ministry at the Duke Divinity School in Durham. A number of years ago, Dr. Willimon wrote an article for the *Christian Century* called “Letting Go Down Here.” In his introduction, he quoted the great early church theologian, St. Augustine, who said about the frailty of human life, “It is as when a physician leans over a sick man’s bed and declares, ‘He is dying; he won’t get over this,’ so on the first day of our life, one could look into our cradle and say, ‘He is dying; he won’t get over this.’ Life, even the best of it, is so — terminal.”

The church, our Christian faith, the truth about our life in Jesus Christ — all of these answer the terminal nature of human life. Willimon writes, “The church’s peculiar Lenten claim is that in dying we live, that all who are baptized into Christ are baptized into his death. The letting go required of us in baptism — that fearful sinking into dark waters — is a sort of dress rehearsal for the daily dying which is life. . . In this faith, we grow up by learning to come down, to let go, to release our grip on our claims of self-sufficiency and self-significance and self-perpetuation.” Then Dr. Willimon makes a shocking observation, as unexpected as giving the baby’s parents a cross and a death certificate on baptism Sunday: “At baptism, the church should be giving the child mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, not a kiss on the cheek, for he or she has only begun to die.”¹

All of this talk about dying might sound very depressing, very morbid, very offensive, but here are two observations:

1) It’s true. As someone has said, “Life is a terminal condition.” You certainly don’t need me to tell you that this morning. Then again, we do need to be reminded of that truth, because we can spend much of life trying to deny that certainty.

2) It’s not hopeless. In fact, our life, even though it is a terminal condition, is far from hopeless, because of the promise and hope we have through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Yes, Paul writes a lot about death and dying, but he also writes a lot about life and living — and that is the final word. Listen again: “just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also in the same way we might live in newness of life . . . For if we have died with Christ, we believe that we also will live with him . . .

For that which he died, he died to sin once for all time; that which he lives, he lives to God . . . So also consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive and living to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:4, 8, 10, 11, personal translation)

We tend to think of death and dying and resurrection as “out there in the future.” For some people, death and dying are much more pressing issues than for others, because of health concerns and disease or even old age. As St. Augustine, Dr. Willimon, and our own life experiences all remind us, death is on the horizon for all of us.

But when Paul writes about dying and rising with Jesus Christ in baptism, he isn’t talking about “out there in the future.” He’s talking about “right here and now.” More specifically, he is talking about how to live as Christians “right here and now.” More than one person has said to me, “You know, Paul is hard to understand sometimes.” I always answer, “Amen!” Why, even first-century Christians sometimes had trouble figuring out exactly what Paul was talking about. At the end of 2nd Peter, which was written toward the end of the first century A.D., we read, “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand . . .” (2 Peter 3:15-16)

One of my seminary professors said reading and understanding Paul is like peeling an onion. He didn’t mean it would make you cry (although it might do just that!). No, he meant that when you peel away one layer of Paul’s thought, you always find something else. Paul uses the words “therefore” and “so” and “because” and “since” a lot. That’s because he builds his arguments layer by layer — what he says now goes back to what he just got throughout saying, and what he says now is the basis for what he’s getting ready to say.

Paul says, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Follow that logic and you might think, “Well, if I want more grace in my life, I need to sin even more!” That’s where our epistle lesson begins this morning: “Shall we remain in/continue to sin in order that grace might increase?” Paul says, “No! No indeed! No way! Don’t even think about it! Don’t go there! (OK, so that’s not quite a literal translation, but you get the point!)

Why not continue in sin so that grace may abound?

“For the one who has died has been set free from sin.” (Romans 6:7)

But we’re not dead yet! We’re here today, living and breathing human beings.

“Do you not know that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3)

So baptism is more than just a rite of passage, more than just “getting the baby done,” more than just a moment in time, more than just a social occasion, more than just getting your name put on a church roll?

“We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:6)

So, if I am baptized, does that mean I no longer sin? (Do I really need to ask that question? But isn’t that what Paul is hinting at?)

“So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.” (Romans 6:12-13)

Do you know when you were baptized? Maybe you remember your baptism, if you were an older child or teenager or adult when you were baptized. Maybe your parents told you. If you can't remember, you can always look for your baptismal certificate, if you have one. You might be able to find that information in the church register in Cheryl's office.

I **was** baptized on Sunday, May 13, 1956, Mother's Day. I **am** baptized right now. That's how Martin Luther would encourage himself in the dark and difficult days of his life. He wouldn't say, "I was baptized on such and such a day." He would say, "I **am** baptized." We sang about it a couple of Sundays ago: "All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, your death has brought us life eternally."

When the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, wrote about the reality that sin continues to plague us in our Christian lives, he used the image of baptism, of the "old self," the "old Adam" being put under the waters of baptism. Dr. Barth holds up "against the fact of the drowning of the old Adam the fact that the rogue is an expert swimmer."² That's the reality of our Christian lives — sin is persistent, even when we say "I **am** baptized!" Come to think of it, when sin is most persistent, that's exactly when we need to remind ourselves, "I **am** baptized!"

Thursday morning, Cheryl asked me, "What do you want to put on the signboard out front? Your sermon title has lot of certificates in it. Maybe I can just put 'A Birth, A Death, and A Baptismal Certificate.' Then there would be only one certificate." That's a good summary of what Paul is proclaiming to us today. Our baptismal certificate **is** a death certificate — death to sin, death to our old selves and lives of self-seeking and self-justification and self-interest. Our baptismal certificate **is** a birth certificate — birth to new life in Christ, birth into newness of life, birth to be alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Anybody living in the strength of Christ's baptism lives in the strength of Christ's death."³

We will sing it in a few minutes:

*We know that Christ is raised and dies no more.
Embraced by death he broke its fearful hold,
and our despair he turned to blazing joy. Alleluia!
We share by water in his saving death.
Reborn we share with him an Easter life
as living members of a living Christ. Alleluia!*

Let us pray: Almighty God, your dear Son went up to joy, but not before he first suffered pain on the cross for our sakes. Your Son entered into your glory, but not before he was crucified for our sins. Lord, grant that we may walk in the way of the cross and find it to be the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ William Willimon, "Letting Go Down Here," *Christian Century* (March 5, 1986, p. 231), at www.religion-online.org.

²Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), p. 253.

³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1959), p. 342.