

Meditation on Baptism
Lenten Worship Service
“Remembering Our Baptism”
March 8, 2017

Introduction

I grew up and was baptized in a different Christian tradition, one where there was no baptism for infants and young children, only adults and older children. You were baptized, and that was it. It was done, completed, checked off.

Then I became a Presbyterian. At first I was not so sure about baptizing infants and young children. “How does that work?” I wondered. They will not remember their baptism, must less understand it.

Then I came to see that Presbyterians spend their entire lives remembering and coming to understand baptism. We are always talking about it. “Remember your baptism,” we say. Or, “We need to do this for our children; we have baptismal vows to keep.”

And we are always pointing to it. We would never put up a curtain to conceal the place of baptism. The baptismal font is out in full view for every service, Sunday mornings, Christmas Eve, weddings, even funerals. In fact, especially funerals, because that is when our baptism is finally complete.

I. Will’s Story

Our middle son Will has a disorder called Tuberous Sclerosis Complex. It causes tumors in the brain and kidneys that, in turn, cause complications in life, like mental disability, autism, hyperactivity, seizures, and behavior issues.

The tumors are benign tumors, but sometimes they grow. And such was the case with Will. A tumor in his brain grew into a giant cell, and it began to cause the restriction of cerebral fluid. Will began to have seizures that would not stop.

The big tumor causing the big problems was deeply embedded in his frontal lobe, difficult to remove. We scheduled surgery, and then my husband said, “You know, we probably should go ahead and make some plans.” So we planned Will’s funeral.

For the bulletin cover, I said I wanted a drawing of a dove descending from heaven over water, with the words written, “You are my son, beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Well, we did not have Will’s funeral. His surgery went well, the giant cell tumor was removed, and Will is still with us. And those plans, sketched on a legal pad sheet, have stayed filed in a drawer through the years. And for years when I thought about them, I had a twinge of uncertainty.

“You are my son, beloved; with you I am well pleased”? That is what God said about God’s own son, Jesus, sent as Messiah. Is it sacrilege to use those words for my son?

II. Fayette's Story

Hobson United Methodist is a church in Nashville, Tennessee. It has been described as a diverse congregation that includes people with power and PhDs and folks who have only third-grade educations; folks with two houses and folks who live on the streets; and, as one church member who struggles with mental illness said, "Those of us who are crazy, and those of us who think they are not."

Some years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to the church. Fayette did not have a home, and she lived with mental illness. Fayette joined the new members' class at Hobson. When the conversation turned to baptism, the sacrament grabbed Fayette's imagination. The pastor, Janet Wolf, described baptism to the class as a "holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power it will not come undone."

In the class during the following weeks, again and again Fayette would ask, "And when I am baptized, I am," and the class learned to respond, "beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold." "Oh yes!" Fayette would say, and then the class could continue.

Janet described the day of Fayette's baptism. The water dripped down over Fayette, and as she took a breath, she said, "I am," and the whole congregation said back to her, "beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold." "Oh yes!" she shouted, and she danced around.

Two months later, Janet received a call that Fayette had been beaten on the street and violated. Janet went right away to the county hospital. As she came down the hallway, she could see Fayette pacing back and forth.

Coming closer, she heard Fayette say, "I am beloved, precious child of God," and then catching herself in the mirror, face bruised, streaked with blood and tears, clothes torn and askew, she started again, "I am beloved, precious child of God, and God is still working on me. And if you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful, I'll take your breath away." [Janet Wolf's story is from *The Upper Room Disciplines* 1999, Nashville: The Upper Room.]

Conclusion

So I have come to understand it is not sacrilege at all to believe that our son Will is God's beloved. Over the years, Will has been labeled and called by a lot of different names, epileptic, disabled, handicapped, retarded. But in baptism God called him beloved and precious and beautiful to behold.

And God calls each of us that, whether or not we can mouth the words, whether or not we even believe the words sometimes.

Grace so powerful it cannot come undone.