

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“ADOPTED INTO GRACE”

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1: 4-11

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 12, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 1: 4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism of Jesus

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Adopted into Grace

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

This morning, we celebrate a very special moment in the life of Rives Sutherland, his family, and our church family as we witness the sacrament of baptism, and it is fitting that our celebration of the sacrament coincides with the day the church traditionally celebrates the baptism of Jesus.

This past week, I met with Marianne and Rives to prepare for this morning. It was a time for us to review not only the logistics of the day but also the theology of baptism, which is for us a sacrament of the church.

In the Reformed tradition, we recognize two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Other Christian traditions may include additional sacraments, like marriage or ordination, and while those practices or ordinances may be important, what sets the sacraments apart in our Presbyterian and reformed tradition are three criteria.

The first is that Jesus commands it. Let me use marriage as an example. We know that marriage was important to Jesus - it was at someone's wedding where Jesus performed his first miracle, and we also know that God established marriage for the welfare of humanity, but nowhere does the Bible say that everyone needs to be married.

Conversely, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we recall Jesus' words: "Do this in remembrance of me." Similarly, in Matthew 28, Jesus commands his disciples: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

The other two criteria that set sacraments apart have to do with the symbol or the sign and that which is signified.

In the Lord's Supper, the bread and cup signify Jesus' symbolic presence as well as the spiritual nourishment that we receive in him, and in Baptism, the physical sign of water, it signifies our identity as God's beloved children as well as our cleansing.

We don't talk as much about cleansing at the time of a person's baptism, do we? Probably because, more often than not, we celebrate the baptism of infants, and we typically don't associate sin with our little ones.

However, it is important that we remember that even our children are infected with the problem that we call sin! Even they are impacted by the fallenness of the human condition!

And this raises an interesting question: If in Baptism we are addressing the reality of sin, but if Jesus had no sin, then why was he baptized? We'll come back to that in a moment.

For now, let's consider that there are a variety of ways to celebrate the sacrament, and there are a variety of churches in which the sacrament is celebrated.

Of course, the use of water is consistent as is the use of the Trinitarian formula, the baptizing of a person "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

That said, if we could look inside the sanctuaries of churches in and around Charleston where baptisms were being celebrated this morning, we would see in some churches parents making covenantal promises on behalf of their children, while in other churches we might see children and adults making their own professions of faith.

In some churches we would see a person baptized with just a little bit of water placed on the top of their heads, while in other churches we might see a person fully immersed.

Now, that diversity of practice by no means diminishes the Apostle Paul's declaration that there is "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism," but it does serve to remind us that what matters is not the pastor, not the location, not the quantity of water; indeed, God can do with a drop what he can do with an ocean.

No! What matters is just that, baptism is about what God is doing!

And God has been about the business of loving us and setting us apart as his children from the beginning.

It is good for us to remember that just as the Lord's Supper finds its Old Testament parallel in the Passover meal, so too does Baptism find its covenantal taproot in the ancient rite of circumcision...

Linda and Rob read about it this morning, about how Abraham and Sarah brought forth Isaac when he was just eight days old to be circumcised. That was their way of declaring to the world that Isaac was a child of God!

In much the same way, we bring our children to the waters of Baptism, and we baptize them into future repentance of faith and we affirm that while we as parents (and as a church family) are responsible for their welfare and for what really is a precious and brief amount of time, at the end of the day, they do not belong to us, they belong to God!

But that is not the only affirmation we make! In the waters of baptism, we are also proclaiming loud and clear that God's love claims us long before we respond in faith, which also means that we are not saved by our works, we are not saved by our pedigree, we're not even saved by our baptism. No! We are saved by God!

And so, we return again to the question I asked earlier: If what we are ultimately saved from are the wages of sin (which is death), and if at some level Baptism testifies to the reality of sin, and if Jesus had no sin, then why was Jesus baptized?

That's a good and difficult question, and even the Gospel writers seem uncomfortable with broaching that subject.

In Matthew's Gospel, for example, John the Baptizer and Jesus seem to have a debate on whether Jesus needs to be there, "I need you be baptized by you," John says, "and yet you come to me?"

In Luke's Gospel, the whole baptismal narrative is conveyed in two verses.

In John's Gospel, while we hear those important words, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," John never talks about the water!

Unlike our reading this morning from Mark's Gospel, John doesn't mention that Jesus went down into the dirty and muddy waters of the River Jordan.

And I know that the water is dirty because, like some of you, I've been there! I've filled up my plastic bottle and I've seen all the debris that floats around on the inside!

I dare say, perhaps the dirtiness of the water serves as a wonderful reminder of what actually happened when Jesus was baptized!

Consider how it was that prior to Jesus' baptism John had been symbolically washing off the people's sins into that water, oh, think about how dirty that water must have been! And now think about that historic Church's confession which asserts that Jesus was washed by our sins, so that we could be washed by his righteousness!

But what does that mean? What did Jesus mean when he put John the Baptizer's mind at ease by saying to him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

What did the Apostle Paul mean when he said, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God?"

Friends, it means that in his baptism, Jesus entered into solidarity with us! As he stepped into the muddy waters of the River Jordan, he who was without sin, he fully identified without brokenness, he took upon himself our sins and their consequences, and he did so, in order that we could be made righteous, by having been reconciled to God!

Now, to be certain, Jesus' work of reconciliation went on long after his baptism, which is why he later said, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

He was talking about how his baptism would be completed in his work on the cross, in his death and resurrection, which is why we sometimes say funerals that a person's baptism is now complete in their death.

Baptism is about the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord! It is about being claimed by that love. It is about being engrafted into a community by that love. It is about being adopted as a Child of God by that love!

I'm reminded of a story my friend and our recent Parramore Preacher, the Rev. Dr. Todd Jones, once shared.

His brother Luther and his wife had longed for a child and adopted a son named Brice after six years of waiting. Later, they received an unexpected call about a little girl, Chrissy, whose health

issues had scared off other prospective families. After prayer and discernment, they said yes to adopting her.

Years later, while waiting in a hospital during a family crisis, Chrissy turned to Todd and asked if he'd play hangman with her. The word she chose was "adoption."

When Todd couldn't guess it, she explained: "Adoption means my mommy and daddy really wanted me."

Isn't that how all of us come to God? Not because we earned it, but because God wanted us!

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that God "destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will."

In the waters of Baptism, we affirm that such a spiritual heritage is ours, because, by grace through faith, God claims us for himself! He marks us as his own, unites in Jesus' death and resurrection and calls to live together in community!

None of us will ever fully comprehend the full breadth and scope of God's power and God's promises that are revealed in the sacraments of his Church.

We will probably always be drawn to that most useful of refrains: "thanks be to God for his indescribable gift," but what we do know is that we are not our own! God has adopted us into grace, and into his very living drama of redeeming love.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.