

“The Grace of Baptism”
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Sunday, August 11, 2019

Sermon 8.11.19
Romans 6:1-18
John 1: 29-34

Will you please pray with me? Loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Have you ever been having one of those really bad days when nothing is going right, you're arguing with someone or your heart is hurting beyond belief and you think to yourself, "I've just got to get out of here." So you go outside to walk or bike or drive, and you don't really care where you go because it's not about that. It's not about where you're going or even what you're doing, it's about where you are.

I don't know if what I'm describing is a universal phenomenon, but this is what I do when I need a break. I go outside. My kids will tell you that sometimes they come home and find me sitting under our lilac tree in my camp chair, or lying in the clover in the yard. I do this because I have a stronger sense of the divine outside under the trees, or out on the lake, or deep in the woods than I have almost anywhere else.

I can find this presence in the middle of a city, by sitting under a tree and listening as the wind sighs through it, or by watching the chipmunks scurry along the sidewalks, grabbing up dropped morsels and then darting back into their hideouts. I can even find it while lying within an MRI machine, by closing my eyes and imagining the beach of Lake Michigan, the warm sand under my back, the cries of seagulls and soft lapping of waves, the glint of the sun off the water, the smell of the lake and the green seaweed that occasionally washes up to shore. And in all these moments, the pounding of my heart or the churning of my belly stills. I can feel a smile start to play across my lips and my entire soul seems overwhelmed by a peace-filled joy.

My emotions move from...whatever they were...sad, afraid, lonely, guilty...to a wholeness, and even a profound thanksgiving. There's something about this connection to God through the natural world that draws us into wholeness. And it's not just about the fact that we had been feeling badly and now we feel better. When we're out in nature, particularly on these summer days (rain or shine), we are pulled out of the depths of ourselves for a little while. We become surrounded by, and connected to, life that isn't our own. There's a power in this sublime connection to life outside of ourselves that is difficult to explain. One of my favorite poets, William Wordsworth, describes it beautifully in his poem commonly known as "Tintern Abbey." Having first described the waters "rolling from their mountain springs," and the "lofty cliffs" he visits, he then says:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods

And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

In nature, Wordsworth finds the source and center of life, a living God that moves through all things and impels all things. God is his anchor, his nurse, his guide and guardian.

[*Move from pulpit to the baptismal font.*] Wordsworth starts his poem with a description of a waterfall and then returns to discussions of that water later in the poem. I think this may be because many people feel a particular connection to God through water. This has to do with the nature of water and how God speaks to us through water. Our baptismal liturgy uses images of water metaphorically *and* literally. [*Start pouring water into baptismal font.*] Outside of this scripture, we know that our bodies are nurtured in the waters of the womb and born with the rushing of waters. In the depths of the oceans and lakes, the waters churn with life, and life on earth evolved from those waters. In water, we can see the life of God moving, working, sustaining all of creation.

This is why the Christian sacrament of baptism is performed with water. Most of the time when I see water in nature and read of it in scripture, I think of baptism. Baptism is a visible sign of something we usually consider invisible—God’s extravagant, outrageous love. It is because God was brimming over with love that God created life, filling the universe with it. God’s love is so profound, so extravagant that God loves us for who we are, not in spite of who we are. This is why we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, to remember that God has filled all of creation with life and love, that God promises to keep sustaining that life, even through death, and that this promise is meant specifically for each and every one of us. For you...for every single one of you. It is this symbol of water, the touch of the water on our skin, the hearing of the water as it pours into the basin that reminds us of this undying promise.

Importantly, the grace we receive through baptism renews us and gives us a new life now, while on earth. When we know that we are loved, no matter who we are—no, precisely *because* of who we are—something wonderful happens inside of us. We feel alive, safe, whole. And once we feel this way, a new thing happens inside of us. When we feel whole, we can turn our lives outwards, focusing on others and their needs; we can focus on being the disciples of Christ that we were all made to be.

Let me explain this a little more. For many of us, when we have an uncertain sense of self, when we are full of self-doubt, when we feel guilty for mistakes or past sins or for ways we harmed others, or when we feel unloved or unlovable, we have a tendency to turn inward. We focus on ourselves or our perceived needs. Sometimes we then behave in a self-destructive manner, turning to alcohol or drugs, or doing things that harm our relationship with others, like overworking, stress cleaning, or just being irritable or aloof.

But when we feel loved, fully and truly loved, we tend to be filled with a sense of wholeness and peace. This is what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Romans: When we really and deeply feel the grace offered by God through Jesus, we gain that wholeness and that peace. The result is that we tend to feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude and we want everyone to feel the love and grace that we feel. So we turn outward, acting with the same grace and love towards others, sharing it with others, as God has shared it with us. This is the righteousness that Paul speaks of—loving one’s neighbors as though they were our family, seeking justice and equity for them, granting them grace and forgiveness.

This is the discipleship that we are called to through baptism—a discipleship of loving righteousness. And God has been so good as to fill the world with a consistent symbol of the grace that should lead us to this righteousness—water. So in the upcoming week, go outside. Find a peaceful place in the woods, on the lake, in the grasses, or maybe by a fountain in the city. Sit and just be. Look around. Listen to what nature says to you. Leave yourself for a while and feel the life that lives, and moves all around you. And seek water. Touch it, hear it, smell it, see it. When you do, remember the life and love that flows through it from God to you. Let your soul become awash in the life and love that God would have you always feel. And may this moment bring you wholeness and, in turn, move you to more acts of righteousness. Amen.