

**16 Pentecost  
September 9, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

This morning we are going to baptize Hunter as part of our worship. Hunter is the son of Alex and Katie, and the grandson of Gray Mason. Alex and Katie live in California and are visiting in the Jacksonville area for a couple of weeks. I officiated at Alex and Katie's wedding two years ago, so I am honored that they have asked that I baptize Hunter.

When I was speaking to Alex and Katie about the baptism they mentioned that some of their friends had had a conversation with their priest about the baptism of their child and what Baptism meant. So this morning I thought I would say something about what Baptism means ... what it means to the church, what it means to Hunter, what it means to his parents and godparents, and what it means to us.

First of all, the Church defines Baptism as a sacrament. Remember, a sacrament is ... according to our catechism ... "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Baptism is one of two primary sacraments ... the other is the Holy Eucharist. The Church says that "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God." The Church even presents the Baptized with a certificate as if it were a membership card. It enters the baptism in the congregation's Parish Register. And when the individual moves to another congregation their baptism record is removed from this parish register and added to the new church's Parish Register.

In many churches only baptized persons are allowed to receive the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist. In some denominations, only baptism in their church is recognized as valid ... if you were baptized in another denomination, you have to be re-baptized to join their church. Some of you have mentioned your experience in other churches where the invitation to receive Holy Communion was for "those who were baptized and in good standing" in that church.

Enough about the bureaucracy of the Church around Holy Baptism. Let me give baptism some history and context, and try to explain some of my understanding of what we are doing today. The Christian Church's Holy baptism is, of course, taken from the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John the Baptist. Holy Scripture tells us that when Jesus came up out of the water there was a voice from God saying, "This is my Beloved with whom I am well please." This raises a question for me ... why was John baptizing in the first place? Wasn't John Jewish? Wasn't Jesus Jewish?

Well, there is a long answer and a short answer to the question ... I'll go with the short answer. The use of running water from a spring or other natural source, as an act of purification, has been around in the Jewish faith for thousands of years before Jesus. The basic idea was to immerse one's self with nothing between them and the waters and God. There are references to ritual washing in the Book of Leviticus. Today, this has become the "mikvah" that is used by Orthodox Jews as a purifying ritual.

In the case of John the Baptist, the son of a Jewish priest who served at the Temple in Jerusalem, he had moved his protests of the Temple bureaucracy into the wilderness, offering Jewish people who could not access the Temple a new way of looking at their relationship to the holy. That is why John the Baptist was in the Jordan River valley, offering an experience of the sacred by immersion in the flowing waters of the Jordan River. Remember, this all predates the Christian adoption of this ritual.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, has a number of references to Baptism, as do the Pauline Epistles. And remember, Jesus never baptized anyone himself. By the third and fourth centuries the early church taught a catechism before Baptism, and that is the source of the Apostle's Creed that we will recite a little later in our worship ... it was an early catechism ... a question by the leader and recitation of the answer by the congregation. All of these baptisms were for adults who were converting to Christianity. It was only later that children and infants were baptized as part of a whole family converting at the same time.

So, what does all this have to do with Hunter's Baptism? Does his Baptism assure that he will go to heaven when he dies instead of an eternal existence in "limbo" as some churches teach? Does Holy Baptism somehow change Hunter's soul? Does it make him a righteous person? What guarantees, if any, does it provide?

Remember, "a sacrament is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." The fact is that Hunter is a beloved child of God. Hunter weighed less than 4 lbs. when he was born. He had a hard start to his life. But Hunter was and is a beloved child of God. Nothing will change for him just because I pour some water on his head. However, the potential is there for something to change for all of us, and therefore for Hunter in relationship to us ... including his parents, grandparents, godparents, and the community and extended family in which he will grow up. It is in that relationship to Hunter that we teach him about his relationship to the holy and sacred and divine in his life.

Holy Baptism IS an initiation rite ... it is the outward and visible sign that says his parents, grandparents, godparents, and this community all take seriously the commitment of raising this child ... and all children of God ... with the values that will lead to a life full of generosity, compassion, justice, and respect for others. Maybe ... for Hunter ... that will happen in the formal setting of a church community. Maybe it will happen for him in an extended family of caring grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and cousins. Maybe it will happen in a community of like-minded parents of other children. Maybe it will happen in all of them. But, by bringing

Hunter here this morning to receive the sacrament of Holy Baptism, Alex and Katie have said they are willing to commit to giving their son a life filled with abundance and grace ... and give him the values that will lead to a life of fullness. That is their outward and visible sign ... their commitment to God, to Hunter, and to all of us.

And why here in the context of a Sunday morning service of Holy Eucharist? Why not just do a private ceremony after church? Or in a beautiful garden? Why here and now? Simple. It is a reminder to this community, whether you are baptized or not, that these are the values that we uphold and live by. We take seriously what Jesus took seriously. We welcome the stranger. We feed the hungry ... the physically hungry and those who are spiritually hungry. We care for the oppressed ... oppressed by sexism, or racism, or bigotry towards gay women and men. We care for the oppressed who are in an abusive marriage, or addicted to drugs, or alcohol, or even oppressed by their economic situation. We value what Jesus valued. And we welcome and support those who would like to do the same. That is our promise. That is the commitment of this congregation. That is why it is important that we offer Hunter the sacrament of Holy Baptism ... not just for his sake, but for ours as well.

When I baptize a child such as Hunter, my prayer is that in this ever-changing world that child may grow with some core values that anchor his or her life. Regardless of whether Hunter grows up and calls himself an Episcopalian, or he is a member of another Christian denomination, or even if he follows a different religion, or no religion at all, I pray that the promises we make today for Hunter will remind us all of our commitment to offer a world of peace and justice to all of God's beloved children. As each of us takes seriously what Jesus took seriously, we effect the world around us in profound ways.

Amen.