

**14 Pentecost
September 11, 2022**

**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 baptizing Gabriel who just turned one year old this weekend. Holy Baptism is the Church's way of welcoming fellow children of God into its community of faith. This morning we will use the Church's liturgy and words to embrace this sacrament.

But, what do the words actually mean, and where did they come from? At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was baptized by John in the wilderness. Is this the same kind of baptism?

In the documents of the early Christian faith ... the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Paul ... it is obvious that baptism played an important, if not primary, role in the expression of this new understanding of a faith community. People were welcomed into The Way centered on Jesus of Nazareth through a ritual of baptism by full immersion in water.

For Jewish people this was an easy reminder of a mikvah ... a ritual bath in running water to restore Jews to ritual purity. Blood was considered a life-force, so any person who touched a dead body, or a woman after childbirth or her menstrual cycle, were considered ritually unclean, and they would have to immerse themselves in a mikvah to reclaim their place in the greater community. And, any convert to Judaism also had to participate in this ritual bath. So, it was an easy step for this new expression of the faith to also use this as a way to welcome their own converts to Christianity.

By the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era, theologians were trying to define exactly what the Christian Church was, and what it wasn't. St. Augustine of Hippo was one of those theologians ... he was born in 354 and died in 430. Pelagius was another of those theologians ... he was also born in 354, and he died in 418. Obviously, they were contemporaries, but they were also competitors in the process of defining the Christian Church, its sacraments, and its theology.

One of the areas of contention between St. Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius was the ritual of baptism of infant children. St. Augustine of Hippo held that all humans were born in "original sin." A person's salvation was through Jesus' sacrificial redemption ... Jesus' death as a substitutional sacrifice for the sins of the whole world ... and therefore baptism in the Church was essential for their salvation.

From this theology comes the notion that if someone died before they were baptized, their soul would live forever in "limbo." "Limbo," as defined by the Roman Catholic faith, is that place

where unbaptized souls reside. It is not Heaven, but neither is it Hell. It was also one way to reconcile the faithful ancestors who preceded Jesus ... Abraham, Moses, David, etc. Since they did not know Jesus ... or his substitutionary sacrifice ... they could not go to Heaven. But they weren't exactly candidates for Hell either. So the early Church ... through St. Augustine of Hippo and others ... invented a way to include them in "limbo."

Pelagius, on the other hand, did not believe in "original sin" and therefore felt it totally unnecessary ... from a theological point of view ... to baptize infants. They could be baptized if one wanted, but not for the reasons the St. Augustine of Hippo put forward. And, as we will see, Pelagius was skeptical of the human reasoning ... the invention ... of this work-around.

At this point, I should add that Pelagius was the loser in the theological debate between him and St. Augustine of Hippo. Not only that, but after his death, an early council of Church leaders voted Pelagius as a heretic, and his teaching as heresy.

But he is my kind of heretic! Pelagius was an ascetic monk from England who was a thorn in the side of the bishops and other church leaders in the Roman-centric Church. Here is an example of his writing:

You will realize that the doctrines [of the Church] are inventions of the human mind as it tries to penetrate the mysteries of God. You will realize that scripture itself is the work of human minds recording the example and teachings of Jesus. Thus, it is not what you believe that matters, it is how you respond with your heart and actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters, it is becoming like him.
Pelagius (354-418)

Many of you have heard me preach about "original blessing" rather than "original sin." You also know that the way I interpret scripture is by asking questions rather than codifying answers. And "taking seriously what Jesus took seriously" is just another way of saying, "*Thus, it is not what you believe that matters, it is how you respond with your heart and actions.*" So, yes, Pelagius is my kind of heretic!

So, here we are some 17 centuries later. St. Augustine of Hippo won the theological debate, and his ideas about "original sin" and the role of the Church ... and believing in the role of the Church ... have dominated the Church's thinking about faith, especially the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet I love Pelagius's phrase, "penetrating the mysteries of God." How does this sacrament of Holy Baptism help us to penetrate the mysteries of God? How does our understanding of Holy Scripture help us to "penetrate the mysteries of God?"

When we look at our Holy Scriptures to "penetrate the mysteries of God" I think we often miss the point. For many people it is as if we are looking for a model of the perfect life of which to

emulate. It is as if we are looking for an answer to all our questions and a way solve all our problems.

Yet, when I look through our Bible for an example of the perfect family I do not find one. Every family ... every family in the Hebrew scriptures ... and every family in the four gospels ... and every family, including the early church family, that Paul writes to and about ... every family described in the Bible is wounded or broken in some way.

Abraham and Sarah ... Isaac and Rebekah ... Jacob and Rachel, and Rachel's older sister Leah ... King David and Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah the Hittite ... Solomon and his son Absalom ... Ruth and Boaz ... and on and on. All these families were broken and/or wounded.

And if you think Jesus' family of origin was not wounded or broken, remember that Joseph wanted to "put aside" his marriage to Mary when he found out she was pregnant. That sounds to me like something was broken.

Then there was Martha and Mary ... and their brother Lazarus. And last week we heard Jesus saying that hating one's own family was justified in a pursuit of becoming a "disciple."

And the early Church community? Paul's letters to all those new faith communities that were struggling with in-fighting and competition for who was in charge tells us that even they were broken and wounded.

So, the question is why these stories? Why these stories and not stories of perfect people in perfect relationship and perfect families. Why not stories that give us the answers to all our perplexing questions? Because the stories in our Bible are stories of the redemptive power of God. Not in some magical, or some merely nod-of-the-head way, but in a way that says God's Spirit is alive and well in even the most broken and wounded of places and experiences. To look for God in the "perfect" fails to see that God is right here next to us in the dirt and grime of everyday life where people are broken and wounded.

I think all of you know that. I don't know some of you well enough to know your whole story, but I do know that many of you have been wounded, and many of you are still living with wounds that seek to be healed. I know that you have been broken in the past, and that some of you feel broken today.

Loss of loved ones, health issues and disease, relationships that are falling apart, anxiety around economic security, family abuse, and addictions ... all of them are wounds seeking to be healed. And almost everyone I know has been wounded ... has experienced something broken in their lives. Maybe it was in the past and you have experienced God's healing ... God's redemption ... but the scars from the wounds still exist.

That is what brings us together. We are here trying to “penetrate the mysteries of God” in the midst of being wounded and broken. My wounds are not your wounds. The way I am broken is not the same way that you are broken. But we are all in this together.

I lend you strength when I have it and you need it ... and you do the same for me. I listen to your confusion because it mirrors my confusion. I share your joy ... redemptive joy ... because I’ve also experienced that redemptive joy. I can comfort you in your grief because I have been there. We are all seeking healing, and we find that healing of our wounds and brokenness best when we work together ... working together to “penetrate the mysteries of God.”

And, into this community we are now welcoming ... joyfully welcoming ... baby Gabriel. Gabriel is a beloved child of God. However ... as we all know ... somewhere as Gabriel grows up he, too, will be wounded. As we welcome Gabriel into this community of faith ... St. Cyprian’s Episcopal Church ... the Christian faith ... the greater worldwide community of all faithful people of God ... as we welcome Gabriel into this community we are saying, “We are here for you.”

You see, this baptism of Gabriel is also a reminder of our own baptisms, and the promises we made, or were made for us. We will reiterate them in our Baptismal Covenant ... the Church’s language and liturgy that sets out our mission with each other.

Here are the words we will use ... and here is the way I read them.

“Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?” We respond with, “I will with God’s help.” Essentially, we cannot do this alone ... we need community, and we need to look to the Church’s past to see how that community has acted to strengthen itself. It is in this community ... wherever it is and whatever it looks like ... that we work on penetrating the mysteries of God.

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” Lots of heavy Church language and theological concepts are packed in that questions, but when you make a mistake, are you willing to put you ego aside, admit you were wrong, apologize to others ... and yourself ... accept the consequences of your misdeed ... and trust that God is still by your side as you move forward.

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” Will you take seriously what Jesus took seriously, and live your life consistent with those values? Have some integrity in your faith ... you cannot say with your lips one thing, and then act in ways that contradict your own professions of belief.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” Sure, why not? But does that really mean **ALL** persons? Even the ones that offend me? Even the ones of whom I’m afraid? Even the person that hurt me? Yes, with God’s help the only way for you to experience the fullness of life is to grant the same to **EVERY** other child of God. Just remember, they are also made in God’s image ... **ALL** of them!

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way, “The only clear line I draw these days is this: When my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? Those are our marching orders. There is no justice for anyone unless there is justice for everyone. Peace is much, much more than the absence of conflict ... it is a way of the heart. And we can not demand respect of others if we are not willing to give that respect ourselves.

These are our values. Into this community we are welcoming Gabriel, promising him ... and ourselves ... that we take these values seriously. We know that we are all broken or wounded in some way ... and that is why we are here ... to seek healing of those wounds ... and to try to “penetrate the mysteries of God.”

This is not magic. This sacrament of Holy Baptism is the Church’s welcome. It is also our promise that “we will be there for you” when you are broken or wounded in this broken and wounded world. We, as this community of faith, do our best to provide that safety because we have known the dire need for safety at some point in our life. And the words of our Baptismal Covenant give us a map for how this community can do that best.

No, this is not magic. Sprinkling water of Gabriel head is not ... at least in my heretical opinion ... has nothing to do with “limbo,” but it has everything to do with “penetrating the mysteries of God.”

Amen.