

“There is Grace in the Water”

Doctrine of Baptism

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Galatians 3: 23-29

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“You wouldn’t take her when she was a baby, you can’t have her now.” Those haunting words, that I heard only 2nd hand, have shaped my understanding and theology of Baptism.

I am preaching a sermon series on doctrine — on what we believe. Today we baptized little Emma here in the sanctuary, and last Sunday evening we baptized 15 people by full immersion in the St. Lawrence river, so I thought this was the right time to preach on the theology of Baptism.

The story behind the quote I opened with is part of the history of this church and this community. Though I was in university at the time in the early 1990’s, in Montreal, I was horrified along with the rest of Brockville when I learned that two grade 9 teenage girls had been struck and killed by a train on their way back to school after lunch. They had heard and seen the first train coming and stepped out onto the tracks after it passed by, not realizing a second train was coming in the opposite direction.

One of the girls was the granddaughter of members of this church, and there was talk, and maybe even an assumption, that the funeral would be here. But her parents refused. My father, who was the senior minister here at the time, learned from the family that for some reason or another the previous minister (or worship committee) had refused to baptize the girl when she was a baby. Why he or they refused is lost in history. Likely it wasn’t an out-and-out refusal — they were probably told that they needed to take a class or attend church services for a certain number of weeks, or somehow enter into a full membership for the baptism to happen. I’m not sure. The reasoning of the church has been lost, and all that was remembered was the rejection. So in their darkest hour, because they remembered the rejection by the church, they in turn rejected the church.

It’s a sad story to open with. I share it because it really is the opposite of what baptism is about. Ultimately baptism is a sacrament of grace.

The United Church of Canada has two sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes 7 sacraments, we recognize 2: Baptism and Communion. What is a sacrament? Good question! The textbook definition of a sacrament is: “A visible sign of an invisible grace.”

A Song of Faith, the UCC's latest doctrinal statement says: *Before conscious thought or action on our part, we are surrounded by God's redeeming love... Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining, and transforming power of God's love and our grateful response to that grace.*

One of the great divides of the church is between infant baptism and what is often called believers baptism—or the baptism of adults. Most scholars agree that there isn't strong evidence of infant baptisms in the church until the 3rd century. The New Testament talks about "households" being baptized, and many argue that that would have included infants, but there was never any mention of it. Likely the baptism of infants began because of the rise of Christendom.

When the Empire became Christian, then the citizens became Christian, and of course they were simply born into that religion. So from the 3rd century until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, infant baptism was the norm. The Protestant Reformers, however, questioned a lot of church tradition and sought to go back to what they saw as a purer form of being church—something that resembled most closely the early church as understood in the New Testament—and so the *adult* or *believers* baptism became more common.

Some churches believe strongly in one form of baptism and others believe strongly in the other. Here at Wall Street we do it all. It is kind of funny in a way to have the two extremes of baptism within a week of each other. Here are some pictures from last Sunday night.



If an alien was looking at what we did last Sunday night when 15 people were baptized through full immersion in the St. Lawrence River, and compared it with what we are doing this morning with sweet little Emma, they would be hard pressed to see a connection. These look like two completely different rituals. And to be perfectly honest, in a way I think they are.

What they share in common is water, but even more they are both about acknowledging God's grace and love for us: God's yes to us, and our response to that action of blessing and belonging.

I believe strongly in both infant and adult baptism. They each focus on a different aspect of the sacrament.

In infant baptism the overwhelming focus is on giving thanks and asking God's blessing on the child. Having some kind of ritual to acknowledge the miracle of the birth of a child is almost instinctive. Just about every culture and religion has something, and having had a child or 4, I get it. Having lost one at a later than normal stage of pregnancy, I also get the fragility of life.

We are in a funny in-between time period. Christendom is pretty dead, but it still lingers a little. Within most of our lifetimes it was a given that a good citizen was also a good Christian, and if you were going to be a politician, or have any social status, you had to be a Christian. That's not the case anymore. Some still lament the death of Christendom. I don't think it is such a bad thing — I think it makes for more authentic followers of Jesus.

In our Christo-centric society, baptism is still the primary vehicle for the ritual and blessing of the arrival of a new child. Even if the parents are not that connected to the church—nevertheless they crave that blessing. There are 3 times that non-attenders might seek out the church: at birth, at marriage and at their death. We call it "*Hatched, matched and dispatched!*"

A lot of churches and ministers get grumpy when a couple want their baby baptized, but really don't want anything much else to do with the church. The sobering truth is that those clergy shouldn't be that grumpy, because now fewer and fewer people are seeking out the church for those three key life passages.

Some clergy offer to do a blessing instead of baptism; I have also. But I have found that because baptism is what they had and what they know, it's baptism they want. Because this sacrament is primarily about grace—it is first and foremost God's "yes" to us—I don't argue. *If they want a baptism, I will baptize.* My job is to bring people closer to God. If they want to thank God for the miracle of their baby and ask God's blessing on the child, then I will help them to do that. Though I have met several young couples who didn't believe in the church and really didn't want much to do with the church, *I have never had anyone come for baptism who didn't genuinely believe in God and want that connection to the divine.*

Adult or believer's baptism also focuses on grace and that blessing, but there is a strong focus on rebirth and on dying to an old way of life and

being born to a new way of life. Little Emma is just 3 months old, so it would seem funny to talk about 'dying to an old way of life'— you just don't build up a lot of regrets in the first 3 months! But just give her time. Life is hard, and life is not perfect. Over the course of life we do make many mistakes and have a lot of regrets and hurts and all sorts of barnacles stuck to us.

More and more I understand the great need to forgive and to be forgiven, the need to start fresh. That is what is offered through the waters of baptism — dying to an old way of life and being born to a new way of life.

Last week at the river, when we had the believer's baptism, some shared a few words about why they were doing it. I wish you could hear from each of them, because it was so moving — Amanda and Jay and Dianna, Colton, (formerly Cindy)—there were so many wonderful stories! I've asked one new member, Sylvie, to come forward today and share what she said last week.

A beautiful young woman with a hesitant but thankful smile comes to the front and addresses the congregation.

Good morning, soul brothers and sisters. My name is Sylvie, and I am a believer. I'm a little nervous, but this is a golden opportunity to express my gratitude. Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a gift and not giving it. Wall Street Church has been a haven of healing for me over the past year. I'm also in the fellowship of A.A.

After a very difficult period in my life, I ended up at Tennant House for mental healing and treatment for addictions. I learned a lot about my behaviour patterns and my disease. After 9 months there, I definitely felt 'reborn!'

I'm especially grateful to this church for offering a course on forgiveness, because I was wondering how come things kept coming up again — "I thought I'd forgiven that person!" In the course, I learned that I hadn't gone through the process of forgiving others. The last person I learned to forgive was myself.

When the opportunity for baptism came, I was incredibly delighted — after being reborn, the next natural step was to be baptized again. As I walked down the beach to the river, I carried a rock in my hand—one I had painted during the course on forgiveness. Others had done the same, and had thrown theirs away — but I still held onto mine. I hadn't yet forgiven myself. After my baptism in the river, I felt I had been forgiven, and I was able to throw it away.

I'm grateful for the gift of life today and the miracle of healing. I feel honoured and privileged to become a member of Wall Street Church, which continues to be a haven of healing for me. This evening I will be sharing more at the Celebrate Life service.

Every morning I get on my knees and give thanks and ask God to show me how to live and guide me in my recovery. And I always ask — how may I serve, to relieve me from the bondage of self? And I replace my fears with faith. God is definitely helping me to find my voice by giving me this opportunity to express my gratitude.

Thank you!

Knowing God's love, we are called to respond to that love. We are called to make a difference and to share the love of God. In the case of infant baptism, it's the parents who make the commitment to live as Christians and to share their faith with their child, and when we are baptized as adults, it is we who respond to God's great love.

But it starts and ends with grace. There is love in the water. There is grace in the water.

This past week I came across a video that reminded me of what baptism is about. If you can please watch it.

<https://youtu.be/rRUHvvhG8Q>

It's adorable! But whether we are 3 months old or 54 or 98 and a half years old, we all need to hear God singing to us a song of love: "You are so beautiful to me!" You are a precious child of God, and you deserve to know that and to hear that. I pray that you will be able to lay down your burdens, your regrets and your sin, and hear again in a fresh, new way of God's great love for you. Thanks be to God.