

Furnishings of the Faith: The Font *Ephesians 4:1-5*

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William Willimon tells, in a very helpful book on baptism, a story from his teenage years. Every time Willimon left home to go out on a date, his mother said farewell with these weighty words, “Don’t forget who you are.”

He writes, “You know what she meant. She did not mean that I was in danger of forgetting my name or street address. She meant that, alone on a date, in the midst of some party, in the presence of some strangers, I might forget who I was. I might lose sight of the values with which I had been raised, answer to some alien name, engage in some unaccustomed behavior. ‘Don’t forget who you are,’ was her maternal benediction as I left home.”¹

The church I serve is in an urban setting. One day last spring I heard a loud bang against the brick by my office window. I looked out to see a man who frequently comes into the church. But this day he stood outside. All of his worldly possessions were bundled up in a couple of green trash bags and piled in a grocery cart. It was the steel cart I had heard careening into the brick and glass behind my desk. Then I heard him yelling. Obscenities poured forth to no one, for he was quite alone. He was spitting and jerking his head from side to side. His schizophrenia was powerfully at work and he was angry.

I called the director of our outreach center who knew this man better than I. Carol Jean would know if we should summon the police or an ambulance. She came upstairs right away. Together we went outside, then made our way around to the back of the building...following the sound of this angry voice as it moved through the cloistered area. Finally, we caught up with him.

Carol Jean stood close and yelled, “Jerry! Jerry!” She called to him again. Then again and again. He never even looked our way. It was as though we were not there. He was all alone. It was as though he did not know his own name. Jerry had forgotten who he was.

Several years before that day, in another city, I baptized a baby girl, Catherine. She was surrounded by her parents and her four-year-old brother and a whole company of believers. Our custom was to walk with the baby into the congregation as a way of expressing that this baptized person was now a part of the community of faith. After the waters of baptism had been splashed on Catherine’s head and the congregation began to sing, I reached out for her brother’s hand.

“Joe,” I asked, “would you like to come with me and help introduce Catherine to the congregation?” “Yes,” he replied, his enormous eyes even wider now at this invitation. Thirty pews stretched before us: fifteen on the right and fifteen on the left. As we approached the first pew, Joe stopped. And since I was holding his hand, I stopped, too.

Joe leaned over to the people sitting in the first pew on the left. And he said in a voice that was both holy and resolute, “This is Catherine Dana Prewitt.” He stopped at the second pew and did the same, “This is Catherine Dana Prewitt.” Fifteen times down one side and fifteen times up the other, “This is Catherine Dana Prewitt.” Over

and over again until each row of people had been introduced to his sister.

It was a moment I'll always remember. Catherine, who already was beginning to know and respond to her name, became known to the community of faith that day. If she is very lucky, she will never forget who she is.

The font, one of the "furnishings of our faith," holds the waters of baptism and tells us who we are. This piece of furniture represents the beginning of all our faith journeys. For it is here, at the font, that we are named and our lives as Christians begin.

Recently a group of laypeople in the congregation met to plan for the restoration of our sanctuary. We met over several months and, with the help of a noted liturgical design historian and architect, we studied and discussed our own sanctuary. I was impressed by the theological significance of many of the conversations we had. We did not spend all those months choosing the color of carpet and wall paint. Instead, we discussed the pulpit, the table, the font. We discussed the purpose and meaning of each of these furnishings of the faith. And we discussed the theological significance of where they were placed in the worship space.

I was particularly intrigued by the discussion about the font. One person was adamant that the font have its own place of significance, that the design have an intended location in which it stood. This person did not want the font moved about as though it were an optional piece of furniture that only needed to be present when we were baptizing someone. It is a symbol of one of our sacraments and it should have a visible, solid place in our sanctuary.

The next time we met, the architect presented a drawing that showed the font on the opposite side from where it now stands. Many in the group objected. Since there is a door that is widely used on one side of the sanctuary, members of the committee wanted the font to remain on its present side...so that people, as they come and go, will walk past the font and "Remember their own baptism." In many early churches the font was indeed located near the front door as a way of expressing that we enter the Church of Jesus Christ by way of baptism.

It is especially appropriate that we consider the font and baptism in this season of Lent. For it was in the Lenten season of the early church that newcomers to the faith went through a rigorous time of learning and examination. The catechumens spent several years preparing to become members of the community of faith. During that time, they could worship with the congregation until it came time for communion. Then they had to leave. Only baptized members could partake of that sacrament.

The last part of the catechumen instruction during the Lenten weeks was intense. After an examination, they were finally baptized early on Easter day or in the week after Easter. They were washed clean in the waters of baptism, anointed with oil as a sign of the Holy Spirit, and dressed in white robes. Then they were escorted into a room where the community of faith welcomed them joyfully. There they joined others in the feast of the Lord's Supper.

Not just adults were baptized, but sometimes whole households. The parents would answer for the ones who were too young to answer on their own. We see a continuation of that practice today in our denomination. The Presbyterian church encourages but does not require infant baptism. One may be baptized at any age. In fact, our Book of Order states that the church is enriched by seeing both infants and adults baptisms.

When a baby is baptized, we have a vivid reminder of how unconditional God's

love is for each one of us. Many of us are prone to think we must earn everything. And not only *must* earn everything, but *can* earn everything. We look at what we have to offer or what we have achieved: money perhaps, a degree of learning, a measure of good works, business or civic or domestic accomplishments. We might wish we could haul these things up to the baptismal font with us...pile them there one on top of the other that they might somehow prop us up before God. Surely these count for something! In fact, the world tells us these are the very measure of who we are and what we are worth.

But a baby brings none of that to the font. No money or power. No great developed intellect. No good works. No achievements. A baby just *is*. And that is enough. Infant baptism is a powerful reminder that we are just like that infant before God. Nothing we have or have done earns God's love. God gives it away as a free gift. We are loved unconditionally and known forever by God. And once God has made the promise to love and keep us forever, it will always be so. God never goes away from us.

Baptism occurs not because we've come to God, but because God has first come to us. So, we come. We are baptized. But this baptism is not the end. It is the beginning of a lifelong pilgrimage with God, a lifelong discourse with our Creator. We say now what we have implied before: Baptism is no mere momentary rite. It is a lifelong process of conversion and nurture which begins at the font and does not end until death, until we are at last tucked safely into the everlasting arms of the God who first reached for us in baptism.²

In our funeral service we pray these words, "Remember our brother" or "Remember our sister, whose baptism is now complete in death." It will take all our lives to live out our baptism.

Like Jerry, some of us will forget who we are. We will forget the identity and name we are given when the sign of the cross is traced in water on our foreheads. Some of us will wander in and out of that identity over the course of our lives. Still others of us will keep the identity close...sometimes as burden, sometimes as comfort...as we go through our lives.

Under the sign of the cross, a baptized life is burden and comfort. It is death and resurrection. As baptized people, we will live a life that *includes* death, but is not *defined* by death.

Salvation on Sand Mountain is a fascinating book about snake handling and redemption in Southern Appalachia. The people we meet in the pages of that book believe they have been called to handle snakes as a sign of the power of Jesus. The life of a baptized Presbyterian may be tame in comparison to a snake handling Christian!

As they lift up snakes in their hands and pass them from person to person, they demonstrate—in a way I hope only to read about—that following Jesus is a risky calling. For them, to live as baptized Christians means that death is always close at hand. Yet death is not what they focus on. Instead, they define themselves as very much alive in the power of the Spirit. The author of *Salvation on Sand Mountain* could have been describing baptism when he says at the book's beginning:

There are moments when you stand on the brink of a new experience and

understand that you have no choice about it. Either you walk into the experience or you turn away from it, but you know that no matter what you choose, you will have altered your life in a permanent way.³

One of the ways we are permanently altered in baptism is that we are no longer alone. We are joined to Christ and to the community of faith forever. We cannot live in careful isolation. We cannot turn away from another in need. Our life is permanently intertwined in the heart of God and in the lives of God's people. We have been adopted into God's family...everyone of us.

That's why baptism is an act of the whole church. Parents and individuals and the congregation together make promises and have responsibilities toward each other. To live in such a community is an awesome task. Ephesians, chapter 4, spells out just how demanding it is to live together as a community of faith as it urges us to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

It is as though we take on corporate responsibility for Willimon's maternal benediction. "Don't forget who you are!" we say to each other as we come and go to church.

Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer, urged his believers to renew their baptism daily. He suggested that, each morning upon arising, they place a hand upon the head (where the sacrament had been applied) and say, "I am baptized."⁴

Willimon says it another way: "The way for a Christian to find out who he or she is, is not to jump on the back of a [motorcycle] and head west, but rather to come to the font and look into those graceful waters. The reflection of yourself which you see there is who you really are."⁵

In this age of self-fulfilment...in a time when people are trying to "find themselves," we know who we are. In this time when people say they can be a Christian without the church...when faith is primarily an internal quest to discover "the God within"...we are baptized into a community where promises are made, responsibilities are taken up, and a common life is lived out together.

Carol Jean's own baptism sent her into the streets calling, "Jerry! Jerry!" offering the community of our baptism to an isolated, tormented man. Joe's own baptism sent him into the congregation that day, hand in mine, stopping at every pew to declare that his sister was the congregation's sister, too.

Everytime you pass by the font, or stand beside it, remember your own baptism. Hear again that maternal benediction, "Don't forget who you are!" In the sacrament of baptism, we give thanks for the steadfast love of God who reaches out to us with everlasting arms. May we lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

NOTES

¹ William H Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, A Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1980), 105

² *Ibid.*, 79

³ Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 2

⁴ Laurence Hull Stookey, quoted in *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982)

⁵ Willimon, *Baptism*, 108