

BAPTISM IS DEATH

Romans 6:1-11

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series C)

January 13, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for The Baptism of Our Lord comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 6, verses 1 through 11. It is on page 799 of the pew Bible. I like to think of this text as a peek behind the curtain into Baptism. We have several passages that teach us that Baptism forgives sins, creates new spiritual life, and delivers everlasting salvation to us. But this is one of those texts that reveals *how* Baptism does these wonderful things. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Romans 6, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The common theme in the texts this morning is Baptism. I think this is rather exciting. However, I realize that you may not be as excited as I am. Perhaps, even though you may identify as a Lutheran, you might not be completely on board with the Lutheran teaching that Baptism saves. Stay tuned, because one of my objectives is to demonstrate that the Lutheran teaching regarding Baptism is, by far, the most biblical explanation.

Or perhaps you're not as excited as I am because you think theology is boring. You like the parables, the miracles, and the cool stories in the Bible. But the doctrinal parts are boring. If, by the end of this sermon, you still think the doctrine of Baptism is boring, that will either be my fault for not explaining it very well, or your fault for not listening very well. One of those two things could happen; they've probably happened before. But it will not be Baptism's fault, because when a doctrine like Baptism is taught and understood correctly, it is never boring, because good doctrinal teaching always includes why it matters and why we should care about it.

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So what is Baptism? Whenever we're figuring out doctrine, we always want to go to the texts that teach that doctrine. And Romans 6 is one of those texts that teaches us what Baptism is.

Baptism is death. It's a different kind of death. It's a death *with* and *in* Jesus Christ. Those words come straight from the text. "All of us who have been baptized *into* Christ Jesus were baptized *into* his death" (6:3). And, "We were buried *with* him by baptism into death" (6:4). Baptism is death *with* and *in* Jesus Christ.

This is really the best kind of death. Jesus experiences all the undesirable stuff, like the physical anguish and the condemnation of the Father. He bears all that for us, and we are baptized into him.

It's also not a complete death. Our entire person doesn't die—obviously, of course. I suppose if it were a complete death, our government would make it illegal. You can't claim religious freedom for killing people. But this isn't the kind of death the government has a problem with. So what dies? "Our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing" (6:6). Our "old self" dies. Another term for this is our "sinful nature." This is the moral corruption that was passed down to us from the fall into sin.

The problem with us as human beings is not merely the bad stuff we do. Sometimes we think of sin too narrowly. We think only of our *actual* sins, that is, the thoughts, words, and deeds we commit that are contrary to God's will. So we think merely of Jesus bearing our sins in his body (1 Peter 2:24), which he most certainly did. But there is more to it than that. Our problem runs deeper, and Jesus' atonement covers more. We are also guilty by nature. We are born sinful—even conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). We "were by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3).

Some of our Christian friends reject the Lutheran practice of baptizing children and infants. It's not just a Lutheran practice, by the way; it has been the common practice of the Christian Church throughout most of its history. The practice of withholding Baptism from children is a fairly recent invention. Even if we didn't have Scriptures to defend the practice, which we do, by the way (Acts 2:39; 16:15, 33). But even if we didn't, the references in the Church Fathers are early enough to conclude that it was also the practice of the apostles.

And, yet, there are those who withhold Baptism from children and infants. They do this because they imagine that children are innocent on one hand, and incapable of possessing faith on the other. Both of these assumptions are directly contrary to clear biblical teaching. Jesus spoke of small children who believed in him (Mark 10:42), and the idea that they are innocent denies every single passage that teaches that we are by nature sinful and unclean.

Our problem as human beings is not merely the bad things we do. The problem is much deeper. It is our sinful natures. This is where every evil thought, word, and deed comes from. So Baptism does not merely deal with our actual sins. It does deal with our actual sins, but it also does more. Baptism goes to the problem of our sinful natures. Our sinful natures must die, and this is what Baptism does. "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death."

And notice that there is no language of symbolism here. Paul does not say that Baptism symbolizes a death with Christ. He speaks purely in terms of reality. We were united with him in his death. This is the reality Paul speaks of. He even bases our future hope of being raised from

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the dead on this reality of death in Baptism. We will be raised in reality, because we have died with him, not symbolically, but really.

Our Christian friends who reject the idea that Baptism saves have to insert the idea of symbolism into all the passages about Baptism. They refer to Baptism as “an outward sign of an inward change.” Maybe you’ve heard that phrase before. It gets quoted so often that we start to think it must come from the Bible. It doesn’t. In fact, there is no biblical passage that says anything remotely close to it.

Now I don’t really like doing this. It makes me uncomfortable and even kind of scared to point out the false beliefs of other Christians, because I don’t want to be seen as arrogant or contentious. So I get no pleasure from this. We should never get pleasure from false teaching, even from correcting it. But sometimes it is necessary to do this, especially when the false teaching is as common as this one, and when it appeals so strongly to human reason. It’s important to point out the error of this false teaching, because it is very likely to tempt many of us to think that Baptism is merely symbolic.

But when you read all the passages—and Romans 6 is a great example of this—the idea of symbolism is never actually there in the text. Now maybe you don’t believe me, because you’ve always understood them symbolically. But consider where that idea of symbolism comes from. Does it come from the text? Or does it come from human reason?

The Scriptures always speak of Baptism in terms of reality. They always speak of death with Christ (Rom. 6:1-11; Col. 2:11-12), the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38), regeneration (Titus 3:5), new birth (John 3:5), making disciples (Matt. 28:19), and salvation (1 Peter 3:21) in terms of reality. Those are all the benefits that Scripture ascribes to Baptism, and it always speaks of these things as realities. Baptism is never described as a symbol of these gifts.

Now maybe I’m a little bit naïve, but I actually think that if you believe Scripture is the ultimate authority on doctrine, and if you take an honest look at the passages that teach Baptism, you will come to the conclusion that the Lutheran teaching on Baptism is correct. I’ve seen it happen before, so I know it can work.

And if someone asks you, “Why do you Lutherans believe that Baptism saves?” The simple and short answer is, “Because the Bible says it does.” That, really, is the entire argument. It also helps, then, if you can go through the passages that teach this.

Now, perhaps the most important thing to recognize about Baptism is that it does not work by itself. “Baptism is not simply water, but it is the water used according to God’s command and connected with God’s Word” (Small Catechism, 4.1). We baptize because God commands us to do it, and we trust God will use it to make disciples, because that’s what he says it will do (Matt. 28:19).

This is very mysterious to us, because all we see is water, and all we hear are words spoken by one human being over another. It doesn’t look like much, and I suppose this is why some Christians reject it. But Romans 6 gives us a peek behind the curtain to see what’s really going on. It’s kind of like when you can’t figure out how your friend’s car goes so fast, so he pops the hood and shows you all the fancy racecar stuff. Paul opens up the hood on Baptism and shows us what’s really inside.

It's death, and not just any death, but death *with* and *in* Jesus Christ. Baptism saves us by joining us to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Jesus Christ died the death we deserve, so that we might have eternal life. But how does that death become ours? Is it just automatically given to every human being? There has to be some link between us and Jesus, and Paul describes Baptism as that link. When we peek under the hood, we learn that "we were baptized into his death. ... Our old self was crucified with him." And if our old sinful natures were actually crucified with Jesus, then his crucifixion is not just his crucifixion and death; it is *our* crucifixion and *our* death. We died! We died! We died! That's the point! It looks like simple water, and it sounds like mere words, but Scripture calls it something more. It is death with and in Jesus Christ.

So to say, "Baptism saves"—which, by the way, those words come straight out of Scripture (1 Peter 3:21)—to say, "Baptism saves," is the same thing as saying, "Jesus saves," because Baptism joins us to Jesus' death and resurrection. Had Jesus not been crucified for our sins, and had he not risen from the dead, Baptism would do nothing. Baptism does not save apart from Christ. Baptism does not save without the cross. The whole reason it does save is because it connects us to Christ. And if the Scriptures did not teach us that Baptism saves, we would have no reason to think that it does. But the Scriptures do teach us that it saves, because it connects us to Christ, and so we believe what the Scriptures declare to us.

Now if you ever hear someone—myself included—teach about Baptism without connecting this doctrine to Christ, then something is missing and something is wrong. The most important thing to know about Baptism is that we are baptized into Christ. That is how it saves. So if the cross of Christ is missing in our teaching about Baptism, something is wrong. The Baptism is still valid, because Baptism is still Baptism, but there's a problem with the teaching. We should never, under any circumstances, talk about Baptism without the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We should also never talk about Baptism as if it saves apart from faith. Baptism does not save apart from faith. If it did, we would just stand on street corners with garden hoses saving the world. But that's not how it works. Baptism requires faith. So in the case of grown-ups who already reject Christ in their minds, we don't expect Baptism to save them, because there is no faith. But in the case of children and infants, who don't have the intellectual capacity yet to resist faith, we consider Titus 3, which calls Baptism "the washing of regeneration" (Titus 3:5), and we consider John 3, which teaches that we are born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). If Baptism is regeneration and the new birth, then we believe that the Holy Spirit uses it to create the required faith. But even here, we remember that this faith must be fed. Baptism is a new birth, so a new spiritual life is created, and like every other kind of life, this life must be fed. The child must be taught the Christian faith. We remember Jesus words when he instituted Baptism. "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). The command here is to make disciples, and the two actions that accomplish this are baptizing and teaching. And these actions must go together. Making disciples does not consist of baptizing only, and it does not consist of teaching only. It consists of baptizing and teaching. This is the disciple-making method Jesus prescribed to us. These two things must go together. We can't baptize kids—or anyone for that matter—and then just forget about teaching them.

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It's still somewhat cultural in America to have your kids baptized, even if church isn't a big part of your life. It's good that these kids are baptized, but if they are not taught the Christian faith, we really shouldn't expect their faith to last. And in these cases, even though the Baptism was valid, it will not save in the end, because faith was allowed to die. Other times, the Christian faith is taught, but the person grows up to reject it. The Baptism was valid, but it will not save in the end if faith is rejected.

So the Lutheran teaching that Baptism saves does not exclude faith. Rather, it includes faith. And we understand faith to be the work of the Holy Spirit. Many of our Christian friends don't understand faith the same way, and this might be the most common reason for rejecting the biblical doctrine that Baptism saves. They tend to think of faith as something we do. It's an experience, or some event, where we decide to trust in Jesus. They're right that faith is an active thing; we do actively trust in Jesus ... once faith is created. But we do not create this faith; the Holy Spirit creates faith. And the Holy Spirit always creates faith in unwilling participants, because our natural wills are contrary to God. Faith is always a miracle of God performed against our wills. It is a miracle when a grownup sitting in a pew hears and believes, and it is a miracle when an eight-day old baby has water poured on her head. In both cases, the Holy Spirit is the one creating the faith. The Holy Spirit is the one who causes the new birth (John 3:8). So Baptism does not save apart from faith.

Perhaps the most dangerous teaching on Baptism happens at funerals. I suspect some of you have been to these funerals. Someone dies who, as far as we can tell, had no faith. Now, we can't see the heart; only God can. But from all appearances, the deceased was not a Christian. He did not attend worship. He did not speak of Christ, unless he dropped something on his foot. And he did not demonstrate any of the other fruits of repentance. We really have no reason to suppose that he was a Christian. But the pastor checks the parish records, and, *There it is!*—he was baptized. The family wants some comfort, and nobody wants to entertain the possibility that he might have ended up in hell. So the pastor uses the doctrine of Baptism to preach the guy into heaven. This is wrong. Now, the sign on the front of the church might say, "Lutheran," but this is merely an artifact of what used to be true. Again, I get no pleasure from exposing false teaching, but we need to distance ourselves from this, because this is not the doctrine found in the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church, and this is not the doctrine we confess. The Small Catechism—which is the most basic Lutheran confession of faith—clearly states that Baptism "effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants everlasting salvation to all who believe" (Small Catechism, 4.2). It does not grant salvation to those who disbelieve, and to say that it does is directly contrary to Lutheran and biblical teaching.

Now this is a really dangerous false teaching, because it can lead people to neglect the importance of faith. It can also lead people to reject the biblical teaching that Baptism saves, because these bad funeral sermons are their only exposure to the doctrine. And I can understand where they're coming from. Sometimes I encounter this objection. Someone says, "I went to a funeral, and you Lutherans just think that everyone who was baptized automatically gets into heaven. You don't care at all about faith." It can be really hard to convince someone, not only that we don't believe this, but that this is not actually the historic Lutheran teaching. If this were the Lutheran teaching, we should reject it, but it is not.

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So instead of rejecting the Lutheran and biblical doctrine of Baptism, we should look more closely at what it actually is.

The Lutheran and biblical teaching is that Baptism leads to a life of faith. You'll notice in Romans 6 that Baptism is actually the reason we should not continue in sin. Rather than it being a license to sin, it is the basis for a life of faith and holiness. If we have been baptized into Christ, then we have been baptized into his death. This means that our sinful natures were crucified with Christ. This means that we have died to sin. This is the reality Scripture teaches, so we should consider this reality and live accordingly. To continue in sin is to deny the reality that has been created in Baptism.

To use a weak, human analogy, it's like a slave returning to his former master. You have been set free from sin. You have been given a new identity as a baptized and forgiven child of God. To persist in sin is to return to your former slavery. It's not who you are anymore, and it makes no sense.

Baptism is death. This is the theological reality this sermon revolves around. This matters. It matters for our eternity, and it matters for our everyday. We have died with and in Jesus Christ. This means that our sins and our sinful natures were put to death in him, and we are forgiven. And "if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (6:5). Baptism is the guarantee that we will also be raised from the dead to live forever. If that's not important, I don't know what is. Baptism, according to Scripture, is essential for our everlasting salvation, because it connects us to Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

And it matters for our everyday, because this is where we get our identity as God's beloved and righteous children. So we live in the joy of this every day, knowing that we are his, and we seek to live in harmony with our baptismal identity, daily putting to death the deeds of our sinful natures and living in Christ's righteousness. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11).

Baptism is death, and it is the beginning of new life. This matters today, and it matters for eternity. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.