

# ALIVE WITH CHRIST

Colossians 2:6-15

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

July 28, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, chapter 2, verses 6 through 15. It is on page 834 of the pew Bible. In this Scripture reading, Paul speaks of the reality that is Baptism, how it connects with the Old Testament, and what it does to us. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Colossians 2, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>6</sup>Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

<sup>8</sup>See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. <sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. <sup>11</sup>In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup>having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. <sup>13</sup>And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup>He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

*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.

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Dear saints,

Your Baptism matters. It matters for your eternity, and it matters for your life right now. Baptism does something that eyes cannot see.

Sometimes we hear some of our Christian friends say that Baptism is merely a symbol. They say that Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change. But this idea is taught nowhere in Scripture and is refuted by pretty much every passage that teaches on Baptism.

Or they might say that it's an act of obedience that *symbolizes* being buried and raised with Christ. This idea borrows some language from the text we just read, but it denies what the text actually says. Baptism is not a symbol; the Bible never speaks of it as a symbol. Baptism actually does something. And it does something that eyes cannot see.

One of my goals during this sermon is to be as clear as I possibly can. Part of that clarity includes letting you know that our teaching on Baptism differs from the teaching of many of our Christian friends. Most Protestant Christians see Baptism as merely a symbol. We disagree. We see it as a reality. And we see this difference as extremely important. So I am not telling you this to put down other Christians. That is never the point of good doctrine. The purpose of good doctrine is to rightly understand God and his actions so that we might have assurance of our

salvation, that we might be preserved in this faith, and that we might be strengthened for good works of love toward our neighbors. And a proper understanding of Baptism accomplishes all three of those things. It gives us assurance that we are God's children. This helps to preserve us in the true faith, and it strengthens us for good works of love toward our neighbors.

And it's important for you to know that we differ from many other Christians on the doctrine of Baptism, because you are probably exposed to Christian doctrine in other places. You might read Christian books, or listen to podcasts, or listen to popular music, or read blogs online. Many of those resources are beneficial. But there are significant differences in many places, and one of those places is Baptism. When other Christians speak of Baptism, listen carefully to what they say about it. Do they speak of it as a symbol? Do they speak of it as man's work? These are human ideas that are simply not taught in Scripture. Or do they speak of it as an act of God that actually does something to us? That is how Scripture treats Baptism. And this difference matters to our faith. So "see to it that no one takes you captive" (2:8).

And the problem is not merely when our Christian friends speak wrongly about Baptism. Part of the problem is that there are places where they should bring in the doctrine of Baptism, but they don't. When someone sees it merely as a symbol, they don't recognize the many ways it applies to our Christian life. For example, Baptism has a lot to say about good works. In several of Paul's letters, he brings in the doctrine of Baptism when he gets to talking about good works or walking in Christ. We see this in Colossians. Baptism is actually the basis for walking in Christ (2:6).

So Baptism is not a minor doctrine. The doctrine of Baptism is taught in about half the books of the New Testament. And in many books it is taught in several different places. That's more than most other articles of doctrine.

Some people think Lutherans talk too much about Baptism. But if we use the New Testament frequency as a guide, we should have at least a reference to Baptism in about half of every sermon, book, article, or podcast. We probably don't even hit that mark here. Baptism is important. It matters for our eternity, and it matters for our everyday lives.

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I've made some strong assertions now about Baptism. Maybe you want me to prove it. Look at Colossians, chapter two. Whenever we want to prove our doctrine of Baptism, we just go to Scripture, so that's what we're going to do.

Baptism does something that eyes cannot see. It is not really done by hands (2:11). This might be difficult for us to comprehend, because we always see hands. Picture it in your mind. What do you see when you witness a Christian Baptism? You see the person being baptized, especially their head. You see water. And you see hands, applying that water to the head. It looks like an outward ritual. And this is why many Christians see it as merely symbolic.

But Paul treats it as something more, and he does this by comparing it to the Old Testament ritual of circumcision. And it's not a comparison of equality, but a comparison from the lesser to the greater. This is important. Baptism is the new circumcision, and it is better than the old circumcision.

Circumcision was a ritual instituted by God in the Old Testament. It involved cutting off a piece of skin from the male body. It started with Abraham (Gen. 17) and continued with all the males in the nation of Israel. Most circumcisions were done on baby boys who were eight days old. That's when God commanded Israel to do it. But Abraham was circumcised when he was ninety-nine, and any male who joined Israel did so through the ritual of circumcision. So, similar

to Baptism, most circumcisions were done on infants, but older boys and men were also circumcised when they realized the need for it.

In short, circumcision was a mark “made in the flesh by hands.” That’s how Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:11. Ephesians and Colossians are sister letters. They were written at the same time, they deal with many of the same topics, and they use much of the same vocabulary. So sometimes they help to explain one another. Here we compare what Paul says in Ephesians, that circumcision “is made in the flesh by hands,” with what he says about Baptism in Colossians: “In [Christ] ... you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:11-12).

So here’s the difference between the old circumcision and the new circumcision of Baptism. The old circumcision was made by hands. The new circumcision is made without hands. The old circumcision was made in the flesh. The new circumcision puts off the body of the flesh. And there’s a little bit of a play on words here. The word “flesh” is used in two different ways in the Bible, especially in Paul’s letters. Sometimes it refers to our physical flesh, like our flesh and bones. This is the way “flesh” is used when speaking of the old circumcision. Other times the word “flesh” is used in a spiritual sense to speak of our sinful nature. This is how it used regarding the new circumcision of Baptism, which puts off the body of the flesh. That is, it puts off the sinful nature. The old circumcision cuts off a part of the physical flesh. The new circumcision of Baptism puts off the entire sinful flesh.

So both the old circumcision and the new circumcision of Baptism look like an outward ritual, but the new circumcision of Baptism does more. It goes beyond what we can see. The real activity is not done by human hands. It is done by the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not merely an outward ritual. It is not merely a symbol. It actually does something internal. It changes you. Human reason does not see this, but Scripture teaches it to be so.

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Some of our Christian friends still object. They might say something like, “You’re talking as if Baptism saves apart from Christ and apart from faith.” Or they might say, “Well, if I’m saved through Baptism, then I can just go live however I want, and I’m covered.”

We can sympathize with their concerns. These are good concerns, but they’re still not listening to what Scripture says about Baptism. Baptism does not diminish faith, Christ, or even good works. The biblical doctrine of Baptism lifts these things up. Baptism never saves apart from faith. And it never saves apart from Christ. The opposite is true. Baptism saves by joining us to Christ through faith. Listen again to what Paul says: “... having been buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

In Baptism we were buried with Christ and raised with him. This is not a symbol. Scripture never treats Baptism as a symbol of being united with Christ. It always speaks of it as a reality. If you don’t believe me, just read the text. And if you still don’t believe me, read it again. This is not something that human reason comprehends. Human reason sees water and hands. Human reason is incapable of seeing beyond the outward ritual. But Scripture speaks in clear terms of what is done without hands. It’s really a matter of submitting to the authority of Scripture. Baptism joins us to Jesus’ death and resurrection where our sins were paid for. Baptism is not something we add to the work of Christ. Baptism is the means the Holy Spirit uses to connect us to the work of Christ. It does not save apart from Christ. It saves by joining us to Christ.

God cancelled the record of debt against us by nailing it to the cross. Imagine all of your sins being written down in a ledger. This might be hard to imagine since we keep records on computers now, but imagine a really official looking book with real pages in it. Imagine every sin being written down in this book: taking the Lord's Name in vain, adultery, theft, hatred, dishonoring your parents, forgetting the Sabbath, coveting, lying, cheating, gossiping, fighting, and all the false gods we have made for ourselves. But it's not just general categories in this book. It details every sin you committed each day: cursing when you found you were out of milk, gossiping about the neighbor, an evil thought about the panhandler on the corner. It has everything, every lustful thought, every time you snapped at your kids or your spouse, and every lazy moment at work. It has a whole bunch of things you didn't even know were sins and even sins you haven't committed yet. You should be imagining a really big book, written in very fine print.

Then God rips out every ink and sin stained page and nails it to the cross. That's where it dies with Christ. You'd think your book would be empty now, but it's not. You open it, and you find the righteousness of Jesus Christ on every new page. He has rewritten your book with his resurrection. His righteous deeds and his righteous nature are given to you.

This becomes yours through Baptism. You were buried with Christ in Baptism. God took your sinful nature, along with every individual sin, and he laid it on Christ. And you died with him there. And if you died with him there, then you were also raised with him. You were raised with his perfect righteousness. This is what Baptism does. It is not mere water. It is not the work of human hands. It is the work of God. Your sinful flesh is put off and buried with Christ, so that you might be raised in newness of life. It does not save apart from Christ. It saves by joining us to Christ.

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And we receive this through faith. If someone denies Christ, they receive none of the benefits of their Baptism. We receive them through faith.

And faith is not something we do. This is one of the places where our minds can go off the rails. We are tempted to think that faith is us choosing to place our trust in Christ. If that is how we think of faith, the biblical teaching on Baptism will never fit. But faith is not our work. Faith is a helpless infant trusting its parents, because it cannot help but trust them. Then, day by day, month by month, and year by year, the child grows and learns about its parents. And as the parents prove their faithfulness, the child learns to live by faith in its parents.

Faith is the trust that God creates in our hearts through Baptism and the Word of God. And then faith is strengthened through the Word of God and the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. And so we learn to live and walk in this faith.

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So Baptism also has a lot to say about how we live as Christians. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. Our sin was nailed to the cross, and we were raised with Christ in Baptism. This is not a legal fiction. It's not the sort of thing where God merely chooses to look at us differently. God does look at us differently. But there is more than that. Baptism is a new birth. It is a new creation. Our sinful nature may still cling to us, but a new nature is born, created in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and God calls us to walk in this newness of life. Who are you now that you are baptized? You are a beloved and righteous child of God. And what does this beloved and righteous child of God do? How does this beloved and righteous child of God live? You trust in God. You walk in obedience to him and love toward your neighbor. We were dead in our

ALIVE WITH CHRIST (Colossians 2:6-15)

trespasses and the uncircumcision of our flesh. But with the new circumcision of Baptism, God made us alive in Christ Jesus (2:13). Baptism is a reality, and God calls us to live in this reality. Every day, as you make various choices in your life, remember who you are. When you get out of bed, ask yourself, *Who am I?* When you are tempted to sin, ask yourself, *What does my Baptism have to say about this?*

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Remember your Baptism. Remember the reality of your Baptism. Remember what this means for you. It means you are a beloved and righteous child of God. It means your sin was nailed to the cross, not symbolically, but really. This means that your sins are truly forgiven. Remember your Baptism, and remember your forgiveness.

And remember what this means for how you live. Living in your Baptism means continually putting off the old nature and walking in the new. You are a new creation. You have received Christ Jesus. So walk in him. Walk in his righteousness.

Remember who you are. You are a baptized, beloved, and righteous child of God. Amen.

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