

BURIED AND RAISED

Colossians 2:6-15

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

July 24, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, chapter 2, verses 6 through 15. In this Scripture, the apostle Paul teaches about Jesus, forgiveness, Baptism, and living in that Baptism. Please stand as you are able for the Word of the Lord. From Colossians 2, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

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

⁸See 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. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having 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. ¹³And 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, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He 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.

Dear Emmeline and all baptized children of God,

You are baptized into Jesus Christ. That means you were buried with Christ, and you have been raised with Christ. This changes your life for eternity, and it changes your life today. Baptism makes you a child of God. This is a reality to be remembered. This is a reality we live in. The daily remembrance of Baptism means that we remember who we are and who we belong to. We belong to our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. So we walk in Christ every day. In this way, Baptism has ongoing implications for our lives. It gives us assurance that we are God's children, and it teaches us to live as God's children. So we seek to grow in our knowledge of him, and we seek to live according to his will. Instead of saying, "I was baptized," we say, "I am baptized." We live in the reality of our Baptism every day. And to live in our Baptism really means to live in Christ, for we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.

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 who is being

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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. Sometimes when we compare two things, we emphasize how similar they are, and we make the two things more or less equal. That is not what Paul is doing by comparing circumcision and Baptism. It is not a comparison of equality, but a comparison from the lesser to the greater. This is really important to recognize. Baptism is the new circumcision, and it far surpasses the old circumcision.

So let's talk a little about the Old Testament background of circumcision. It was a ritual instituted by God that involved cutting off a piece of skin from the male body. It started when God made his covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17). It was a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen. 17:10-11). And this sign was to be performed on every male in Israel. It was a physical act that made a boy or man a member of Israel and an heir of God's covenant with Abraham. If an Israelite refused to be circumcised, he was cut off from the people of Israel, and, despite his blood relation to Abraham, he was not considered an Israelite. I imagine this scenario was quite rare, since most circumcisions were done on baby boys who were eight days old. That's when God commanded Israel to do it. If any Israelite boy grew up without being circumcised, it would have been the fault of his parents for neglecting it.

So Israelite boys didn't really have a choice in the matter. Their parents decided for them that they should be Israelites. And this is similar to how we treat Baptism. Sometimes we hear people say, "Faith is a really big decision, I want my children to make their own decision." This is just foolish. We don't do that with other big things. With some things, like their careers or who they will marry, we let them make those decisions, because there are multiple good answers. But when we are convinced that one thing is right, we go ahead and make that decision for our children. That's what good parents do. The things we really care about, we instill those values in our children. We teach them the difference between right and wrong. We teach them how to be safe. We teach them to treat other people with respect. We even teach them what sports teams to cheer for. Even those parents who let their children discover their own morality, they do so because they are moral relativists, and they are instilling that value, or anti-value, in their children. Every parent instills certain values in their children. The chief of these is our Christian faith, and we begin that work by bringing our children to the Lord in Baptism. This is what Israelite parents did when they had their sons circumcised, and it's what we do with our children.

There were some cases of adult circumcision, just as we also have cases of adult baptisms. Abraham was circumcised when he was ninety-nine years old. That's because it started with him. And any male who joined Israel as an adult went through the ritual of circumcision. You didn't really need to be a blood relative of Abraham to be an Israelite. You could join by circumcision. So they had adult circumcisions, just like we also have adult baptisms.

So circumcision was an outward sign, but it had spiritual consequences, because it made a man or boy a child of God's covenant with Abraham.

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

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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).

This is where we really start to see that Paul is not making a comparison of equals, but he is moving from the lesser to the greater. 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 bodies, 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 is 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 does much 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.

Some of our Christian friends object to this. They look at Baptism differently. They say, "Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change." They quote this so often, you would think it's a Bible verse. It's not. The Bible never says anything remotely close to this, and nearly every passage that teaches on Baptism explicitly refutes this saying. It's kind of odd, because most of these Christian friends of ours are very committed to the authority of Scripture. So it's odd that they would deny the biblical teaching on Baptism. Why would they do this?

Let's put the most charitable construction on this, especially since the most charitable construction is probably accurate. They actually have some valid concerns. 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 and sin as much as I want, and I'm covered."

Often times they get this impression, not from actual Lutherans, but from those who have drifted away from biblical doctrine and historical Lutheran teaching. They still call themselves "Lutheran," but have drifted toward universalism, the teaching that all people go to heaven, regardless of faith. As a step in this direction, many started speaking as if Baptism saves apart from faith.

So when some of our Christian friends object to this, we can sympathize with their concerns. These are valid concerns. But our answer is to look even closer at 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

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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. 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're favorite baseball team blows a late lead, gossiping about your classmate or coworker, an evil thought about someone on Facebook. 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. At first, when we hear that God cancelled the record of debt, we might just think that he erases the debt, like highlighting text on a computer screen and pressing delete. We might think that God just chooses to forget it. But that's not really how debt works, and that's not how forgiveness works. A record of debt is not just words on a page. That record stands for something real. If a bank forgives your debt, and they don't really do this, but let's pretend they did, if a bank forgives your debt, they don't just press a button to make it go away. It means that they pay your debt. They accept the cost of it. And that's the way we should think of God's forgiveness. He doesn't just forget it. He doesn't just decide to not be mad anymore. It means that God pays for it. He assumes the cost of it. So when Paul talks about God cancelling the record of debt against us, it's not just a picture of God ripping the pages out of the book, but he nails it to the cross. And think about this: What did God nail to the cross? Was it just a piece of paper? No. It was the flesh of his own Son. That's the cost God assumed for our sin. The sin he nailed to the cross was his very own Son. "For our sake [the Father] made [Jesus Christ] to be sin ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

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. This is not a symbol; it is reality. Listen to the words of Scripture: "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, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also

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raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:11-12).

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, then 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. So Baptism is not just some event that happened in the past, like we can go on living however we desire. Baptism is the beginning of the Christian life. It is the start of growth. We live in our Baptism every day when we confess our sins and trust in Christ’s forgiveness. If we’ve walked away from the faith, we return to our Baptism by confessing our sins, and we receive Christ’s forgiveness.

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 still remains, but a new nature is also 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 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?*

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.

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