

SERMON

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What does this mean? It's a good Lutheran question. For those of you who journeyed through a Lutheran Confirmation class, you may recognize it as the question Luther asked of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Luther then asked "What is baptism?" And that's our question for today as we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord.

Let's start with some doctrine...Luther answers that question, "what is baptism?" by saying, "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead, it is water used according to God's command and connected with God's word." Okay, it's a start and he goes on to say more, but I'm going to jump to a later doctrinal work, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, published in 1997 by the ELCA as a "Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament." That sounds pretty official. Listen to Principle 14 which answers that same question, "What is baptism?"

In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone.

Okay, now we're getting somewhere as we hear what baptism means for us – what happens to us, how it might work.

The Use of the Means of Grace goes on to give some background:

"By water and the Word in Baptism, we are liberated from sin and death by being joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Baptism God seals us by the Holy Spirit and marks us with the cross of Christ forever. Baptism inaugurates a life of discipleship in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbors, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ."

It goes on to describe the application of baptism in the life of the church.

"Baptism is for the sake of life in Christ and in the body of Christ, the Church. It also may be given to those who are close to death, and is a

strong word of promise in spite of death. Individuals are baptized, yet this Baptism forms a community. It is for children. It is for adults. It is done once, yet it is for all of our life.”

So, there you have it, a clear and well-formulated essay to establish Lutheran orthodoxy when it comes to the how and why of baptism. Except it says a lot more than that. It goes on for 16 more principles with background and application statements about what we, as a church, do with baptism. And all of it is trying to answer a question for which we don't have definitive answers.

When I'm meeting with families to talk about baptism, I don't hand out *The Use of the Means of Grace* for them to review. I give them this book, *Let the Children Come: A Baptism Manual for Parents and Sponsors*.” It has pictures! It's not that the doctrine isn't important. It's not that we can't learn from the words of those who have gone before us in the faith, but it is a lived practice and not an academic exercise.

I appreciate what Pastor Daniel Erlander offers about the breadth of theology attached to the sacrament of baptism – that it isn't always a precisely worded theory...and never has been as the biblical witness recounts.

Baptism is about seeing God at work – right here in our midst, not just 2000 years ago in the water of the Jordan. Baptism is God claiming Diana, the same way that God claimed Jesus the Christ through the actions of John and that community.

We strive for the right way of understanding what is happening, even as we sometimes fail to understand how it actually works.

I don't know exactly how many people I have baptized. I remember many of them – usually the ones that stand out are the ones that have some unusual element to them. I might not remember the details of every 6-month-old that I've baptized. I remember the way my niece screamed through the **entire** rite. I remember the time a baptized an older baby who clung to my sleeve for dear life as I held him over the water. I remember the 9 year old, who asked me, after I had tried to explain how this water would make him “new”, “will I remember what happened before the baptism?”

And I remember my first baptism.

I wasn't actually a pastor yet. I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education at Gettysburg Hospital after my first year of seminary. Ten weeks of learning what it's like to offer pastoral care in a variety of circumstances – from the routine of knee replacements to

the grief at the end of life.

I remember the day that the message came for me to go to labor and delivery and you can probably guess where this is going. But you should also know that this hospital, this maternity ward I was about to enter, is the same place that my wife and I had welcomed our children just a few years before. I have these beautiful memories of welcoming Cole and Sydney in these rooms – rocking Syd in the nursery in the wee hours of the morning, going with Cole while the doctor and nurses gave him a little extra “encouragement” to breathe. That was 27 years ago today...tonight.

And I was called into the room to meet with a young couple, whose daughter, Payton, was stillborn. With my one year of seminary education and my few weeks of pastoral care experience, I went into a delivery room – I don’t think it was one that my wife and I had been in – to try to offer care to this grieving couple. I offered my condolences and they asked me to baptize their child.

Application 23A of *The Use of the Means of Grace* is pretty clear and direct:

“A dead person, child or adult, is not baptized. Prayers at such a death may include naming, signing with the cross, anointing for burial, and commendation to God. Prayers and commendations may be offered in the event of a stillbirth or of the early loss of a pregnancy.”

I knew the academic answer, and as I recall, I fumbled my way through trying to explain that in some way to Payton’s parents. And then I baptized Payton.

No lightening struck in the room. The grief was lessened maybe for just a moment, but I know that in that room on that summer day of 2007, God was at work. We had an academic argument about it later – when my theology professor reminded me that good theology is at the heart of good pastoral care. I would likely handle that situation a bit differently now, given what I’ve experienced with baptism since.

But the heart of Payton’s story remains – she was claimed by God even as she had no chance to live that out in life. The heart of the Gospel story remains; Jesus was revealed in the waters of the Jordan to be the beloved child of God. We hear this story everyday as we gather in early January – moving from the manger to the grown Jesus who is about to do what God planned for the world.

The heart of our story remains; we have been claimed in the water of baptism – no matter how it happens – to be God’s beloved children. We learn about that claim as we are

able and that is worth our time and effort. But it's not an academic exercise, it's the story of our faith. It's the story of God's love.

We live that claim every day that we draw breath. Diana lives in that promise of love from this day forward, as we do. This day and every day. Thanks be to God. Amen.