“The Sacrament of Baptism”

John 15:12-17*,* Acts 2:37-42

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I don’t remember my own baptism. I don’t remember that summer day when my parents presented me before God and the church. I don’t remember getting dressed up in that white gown and feeling the cool drips of water upon my head. I don’t remember that Episcopal priest asking questions of my family and offering encouragement to my godparents.

I was baptized as a baby. Long before I could make the choice. Long before the event would be planted in my memory.

I have friends who remember their baptism. As teenagers, or as adults, they made that conscious decision to follow Christ and mark their faith with water. They themselves responded to the minister’s questions. They themselves entered that water of their own volition.

There are some days when I with I’d had that choice, later in life. I think about how special it would be declare my faith in such a profound manner. To make that choice as a mature person of faith. To repent, as Peter calls those early believers to do. To walk toward that water, thirsty for God’s grace and love.

But I was born into a tradition of baby sprinklers. Although we do baptize adults and older children, we Protestants generally baptize infants. We like to baptize ‘em young. Early enough so they don’t make too much of a fuss when the water hits their heads, but we generally wait until the parents are out of the worst of the sleep deprived state of taking care of a newborn. We want to make sure they are making a rational decision for their child, not one made out of hysterical exhaustion. Those first few weeks with a baby can be brutal.

When we baptize babies, we aren’t doing it to secure their salvation. We aren’t washing them clean of sin, so they are guaranteed a ticket to heaven. We aren’t accepting Christ on the child’s behalf. We aren’t committing some sort of spiritual child abuse.

When we baptize a baby, we bear witness to the fact that God chooses us. Already. Before words form on our lips. Before our legs are steady enough to walk. Before our minds have any concept of God, or church, or religion. God chooses us. As John 15 tells us, we don’t make the first move. We don’t choose God. God chooses us. God’s grace is there for us before we know it. This is not a manipulative or abusive love. It isn’t a love that is set on an agenda. This is a welcoming, abundant love that can only come from a creator. This a love that is so overwhelming, we can’t even begin to fully understand it. God’s love for us is so big, so grand, no words or actions or even sacraments can fully capture it.

But baptism comes pretty close. This is a sacred event which points us toward God’s love. It is one that was instituted by Christ. When he commissioned those early disciples, he told them to go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And so we do as he told us to do.

Baptism is a declaration that in life and in death, we belong to God. That we are wrapped up tightly in God’s embrace. That we belong to the covenant of Christ. In those waters of baptism, we are reminded of God’s promise toward us. That whatever circumstances we’re born into, we are all beloved children of God. That whatever trouble comes before us, God is with us. That no sin or evil or injustice in this world stands a chance against the abounding love of God!

In those waters of baptism, we are charged with the responsibility of living with faith. Those waters stir up for us a call to love God and love our neighbors. In a chaotic world, full of so many unknowns, the peaceful waters of our baptism gives us purpose and direction. We realize that we are participating in something much bigger than ourselves.

And that’s just it. Baptism is about much more than ourselves. Sure, a baby is presented at the water and her head is doused. But this event isn’t just about her. It’s about everyone present. Everyone who witnesses a baptism is actually participating in the baptism. Each person responds to the questions. Promising to nurture that child in her faith. By word and deed, with love and prayer. Each person present accepts the responsibility of making sure that that child is loved and knows how to love others. Making sure that that child learns about Christ and who he is for us. Making sure that that child is taught throughout all her days, about God’s story and her very special place in that narrative.

Baptism is more than a onetime event. Baptism is a lifetime journey which deepens as we go. The climax of our story is not on the day of our baptism. The story gradually builds until the day of our death. When our baptism is made complete. The story ends on a high note as we are welcomed into God’s kingdom and gain that insight and understanding that we long for all our lives. Although our encounter with the water is brief, its impact lasts a lifetime.

I don’t remember my own baptism.

But I do remember the people in my journey who have fulfilled and continue to fulfill their end of the bargain. My family has done their part to raise me in the faith and showed me how to follow Christ. I remember Sunday school teachers and preachers and little old ladies at coffee hour who encouraged me along the way. Listening to me recite Bible verses, imprinting those words on my heart. I remember mentors and friends who asked those deep questions. Challenging me to decipher what I believe. I remember countless committees who examined me for ministry. Affirming my call and urging me to pursue it.

Most of these folks weren’t present at my baptism. But they understood the responsibility we all have to encourage one another in our faith. To show Christ’s love to all. And to make sure the waters of our baptism continue to transform us all the days of our lives. Amen.