

Shortly after I came here, I was asked to baptize a sweet little baby girl. How could I say no? True, her parents were not members, but they were confirmed Lutherans who they said they were planning to join, and they promised so sincerely that they would raise their daughter in the Christian faith. So I baptized her. That was 11 years ago. I haven't seen them in church since.

Experiences like that make you wonder what some folks think Baptism means. Is it just a nice tradition, something parents do for their child because their parents did it and their parents before them? Or is it spiritual life insurance – so that, if something should happen, they can be sure their child will go to heaven? Is it just a symbol – like Protestant baby dedications, only wet? Or in the case of adults, is it just a way of showing they've accepted Jesus as their Savior? What does Baptism mean?

To some, this may seem like just a picky theological question – the kind they prefer to ignore or even avoid for fear it might be divisive. But if it is just a picky question, why did Jesus command us to **“go make disciples...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”**? He didn't just suggest this, mind you; didn't just encourage it; Jesus commanded Baptism. Why -- if it was just a symbol, and a picky one at that? Or in the book of Acts, why was every conversion followed by Baptism? Not by saying “the sinner's prayer,” not by an altar call, but by Baptism. And when whole households were baptized, why don't we hear about the younger ones getting dedicated? On Pentecost, we hear Peter say of Baptism, **“the promise is to you and to your children,”** but neither he nor any of the other apostles say a word about dedication. Why? Could it be that – back then, at least – Baptism wasn't just a picky theological question? Could it be that, to the contrary, Baptism was considered something very important? In fact, could it be that Baptism has more implications for the Christian life than most of us realize? If there's even a chance of that, we need to explore more deeply what Baptism means.

To do that, we first need to move beyond an all too common prejudice among Protestants – the idea that Scripture must either be interpreted literally or symbolically. That can blind you to the real message in many passages. Take Paul's words in our text: **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”** Now, obviously Paul isn't speaking literally. We weren't literally buried with Christ. So some would say the words must be symbolic – it's like we died and were raised with Christ. What else could they mean?

What indeed! A careful examination of our text, along with others like it, will show that Paul is not speaking literally or symbolically but in yet another way. He

is describing a profound *spiritual reality*, which cannot be seen – any more than God or love can be seen – but which is still true and real and full of practical meaning for our lives. What is this reality? In Baptism we were spiritually joined to Jesus, and joined not just superficially but in a way so profound that in God’s eyes we are joined with Him in His death and resurrection. Joined with Jesus, we have died to sin and so are sure of forgiveness. Joined with Jesus, we are raised to newness of life and so are sure of eternal salvation. Paul doesn’t say it was *like* we were joined to Jesus, *like* we died with Him, *like* we rose with Him. In fact, his point wouldn’t hold up if that were all he meant. He says we *were* joined to Jesus. The connection is real! As water was poured upon us “**in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,**” a profound personal bond was forged between us and the Lord. We were “**baptized *into Christ Jesus***” – into union with Him.

Now, think what this union means. For starters, it means there’s no distance between us and God; there is no disconnect. And that’s huge! For truth be told, many people think just the opposite. To them, God is up there or out there, and religion is their way of reaching out over the distance. Morality is something they do for the God up there, out there. Forgiveness is something they ask of the God up there, out there. Prayer is something they say to the God up there, out there. And eternal life is something they seek from the God up there, out there. Such religion isn’t very satisfying– not if you feel so distant from God. But then again, it can be very convenient religion. Reach out to God when you feel the need; ignore Him when you don’t. The sense of distance makes that very convenient!

And let’s be honest: this is always a temptation in religion. However much we may feel a need for God, a desire for closeness, our human nature also wants a little distance – wants a little wiggle room where we can feel independent, feel we’re in control, feel we call the shots, picking and choosing just how “religious” we’re going to be at any particular moment. At its worst, this sense of distance can lead self-indulgence – *I can live however I want, because I’m saved by grace and God has to forgive me*. Or it can lead to self-righteousness – *I do this, that, and the other, so God owes me salvation*. But even short of such extremes, human nature finds religion more convenient when there’s a little distance from God, however unsatisfying such religion might be.

Of course, true Christians know this full well, so many distinguish carefully between mere religion and having a personal relationship with the Lord. Yet even then, some can still have a sense of distance, of disconnect. Their life is here. The Lord is here – in front of them, behind them, right next to them – which may be closer, but there’s still some sense of distance, isn’t there? So they can still feel somewhat disconnected. And this can really show in their spiritual assumptions – especially that if they don’t feel their religion strongly enough, they can’t be sure it’s real. Think what that means! A lot of energy has to go into mustering the right feelings. It also means their faith can fall prey to emotional ups and downs. Can they be sure they’re saved on the days when they don’t

feel it so much? Can they be sure they're forgiven if they don't feel enough sorrow for sin? And is worship really worship if they don't feel the Lord's presence? You get the picture. Even with this focus on the personal relationship, there's still some sense of distance, of disconnect. And what's a Christian to do? All too many try to bridge the gap with feelings. Which is never completely successful, at best it's always temporary, and it's so unnecessary.

They're kind of like a certain little fish who heard that without water he would die. Alarmed by this, he swam all over the place looking for water. Might it be hidden among the rocks? He couldn't find it. Might it be hidden behind the seaweed? Couldn't find it. Finally, in his desperation, he turned to an older, wiser fish and begged him, "Please! Do you know where I can find water?" "No need," said the older, wiser fish. "How can you say that?" he asked, "I've been told that without water I will die." "True enough," said the wise old fish, "but there's no need to find water. You are already in it, and it is already in you!"

"Baptized into Christ Jesus," we have been given the same kind of life in the Lord – not just searching *for* Him, not just a relationship *with* Him, but actual union: abiding *in* Him and He in us! We were **"baptized *into* Christ Jesus,"** and what a difference it makes when we realize this! Faith need not be mustered by believing real hard, but comes from simply abiding in the Lord. Inner peace need not be sought with earnest striving, but comes from simply abiding in the Lord. And as for spiritual growth, Jesus specifically said, **"If you abide in Me, and I abide in you, you will bear much fruit...apart from Me you can do nothing."** And isn't that what Paul himself experienced? **"I can do all things *in Him* who strengthens me."** The same is true for us. And especially when it comes to forgiveness, what more powerful assurance could you have than knowing you're joined to Jesus in the very death that won your forgiveness? Likewise when it comes to eternal life, what more powerful assurance could you have than knowing you're joined to Jesus in the very resurrection that guaranteed your salvation? There's no distance or disconnect at all, because you're *in* Christ. Joined to Him, you are dead to sin. Joined to Him, you are alive to God. There's no need for searching, striving, or trying to feel it. This is reality. Spiritual reality! No more burdens of guilt. No more need to fear death. No more distance or disconnect from the Lord. That's what your Baptism means.

Now, I know this is really deep and can really be hard to get our minds around. To some it may even seem a little dangerous – *like so long as we're baptized, we can live any way we want and still be sure of salvation.* But nothing could be further from the truth. And actually, Paul speaks to this concern in our text. Then as now, there were those who tried to use grace as an excuse to live however they wanted. So after preaching about grace, he asks, **"What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!"** But now observe his line of argument. To Paul, it's not Baptism that might make us feel we can live however we want; certainly not believing we're joined to Jesus in Baptism. To him, what's dangerous is *disconnected* grace.

That is, grace as a religious principle *disconnected* from real union with Christ. In fact, that is why Paul brings in the emphasis on Baptism. So long as there is any disconnect between us and the Lord, that can give us wiggle room to abuse grace as an excuse for sin. Doesn't matter if the disconnect is big or little, real or imagined, any distance at all can tempt us to think we're on our own; we can do what we want, even use grace as an excuse for sin. But if we know deep down that wherever we go, whatever we do, we are joined to Jesus, then the wiggle room disappears. In fact, if we remain vividly aware that in some mysterious way we have been actually joined to Jesus in the very death that atoned for our sins -- well then, he asks, **"How can we who died to sin go on living in it?"** How indeed! That danger comes from treating grace as a principle we can apply however we like *without* union with Christ. Godliness comes from living *in* union with Christ, the union forged in Baptism. In fact, for Paul this is a basic principle of Christian ethics. **"If you have died to sin, put to death what is worldly in you..."** **"If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above..."** And more personally, **"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."** That's the spiritual reality! And the more we remember this, the more we remember we're joined to Jesus, the more we remember what Baptism really means, the less likely we'll abuse grace, the more likely we will live by it.

But of course, remembering the reality is key! Years ago, Eugene O'Neill wrote a play called *Lazarus Laughed*, in which he imagined how Lazarus would have lived his life after Jesus raised him. I think there are some good parallels to our baptismal death and resurrection with Christ. For, of course, what Lazarus experienced would totally change his way of life. As he comes out of the tomb, first he looks Jesus square in the eye and says, "Yes!" Then he lets out a gentle laugh. And so it goes for the rest of the play. Seeing people waste their time pursuing goals ultimately don't matter, Lazarus laughs. Seeing people pile up wealth they ultimately can't take with them, Lazarus laughs. Seeing the Emperor parade around – so vain, so pretentious – Lazarus laughs. And even when threatened with execution, Lazarus laughs at death, too. After all, he's already been there, done that, got the t-shirt. And why fear one who can kill the body but not the soul? For that matter, why waste time doing anything but what pleases the Lord? Death has a way of setting your priorities straight! Resurrection has a way of motivating you in the right direction. Now, obviously this would not have been the case if it had just been like Lazarus had died and been raised. Nor would it have been the case had he let himself forget what the Lord had done for him. But experiencing the real thing and remembering – yes, what a difference that would have made!

Well, we too have died and been raised – with Christ in Baptism – and the more we take to heart this spiritual reality, the more it will change our perspective on life and death and how to live, thanks to the indwelling Christ Himself. That's why I have lifted up this very difficult subject this morning. As we have seen,

there is a good reason why Jesus didn't just recommend Baptism but commanded it! What theory cannot do for us, what symbolism cannot do for us, real union with Jesus can. As He said, **"If you abide in Me and I abide in you, you will bear much fruit."** So let's take these thoughts home. Work them through. Pray them through. Take them more and more to heart. For there is such assurance, such depth of meaning in these words from St. Paul: **"Do you not know that all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life...So you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."** Amen.

