

“For You, For Your Children, For All...” (Acts 2:39) Pentecost, May 31, 2009

People sometimes ask me, “How many baptisms have you performed over the years?” I always answer: *I don't know*. But this morning I'll give you a more honest answer: *I also don't want to know*. And before you jump to any conclusions, let me explain why. To me, each Baptism is unique, just as each person is unique, and I never want anything to detract from that – like keeping score. “*Well, congratulations, RLC shopper! You are Baptism #2876!*” No, whether I am baptizing a baby, a child, or an adult, I am very conscious that what's happening is unique and unrepeatable. God is claiming this particular person as His child and heir. God is giving this particular person forgiveness and eternal life. God is filling this particular person with the Holy Spirit. God is enlisting this particular person into the service of Jesus Christ. True, the same could be said of many others – millions, even billions of others. But the deeper truth is that what's happening is happening to *this* person, and what matters most is what's happening to this person. Spiritually-speaking, this person will never get lost in the crowd. To God, there is no crowd – just you and you and you and you and you. Of course, that also means this person will never be able to *hide* in a crowd, either – never be able to assume, “Among so many, what I do or don't do doesn't matter all that much.” To the contrary! Each person is called as an individual. Each person believes as an individual. Each person is saved as an individual. Each person lives as an individual. Each person dies as an individual. And in eternity, each person must stand before God as an individual. Technically, the person may be Baptism #2876, but because God is God, He is able to love each one of us as if there were only one of us to love. So, in His eyes, I am Baptism #1; you are Baptism #1; the baby, child, or adult at the font is Baptism #1. No one is just an arbitrary number. So I don't keep track of numbers. Each person, each Baptism, each relationship with God is unique!

Now, wouldn't it be nice if I were to end the sermon here? We could all go home with a sweet reminder of how special and unique we are. But you know me. You know I wouldn't be bringing this up if there wasn't another side...and there is. Special doesn't mean self-sufficient. Unique doesn't mean complete. These words just mean we've got potential! But how do we best develop our potential? How do we make the most of it? In a society that worships individualism, the temptation is to be individualistic. *It's all about me being me all on my own!* But in the spiritual life, that's not the answer. Try to go it alone and we'll squander our potential. The answer is quite the opposite. Our unique potential is best developed in community. Our special strengths are best expressed working together with other Christians. And that's the truth I'd like to explore today.

To put this into perspective, imagine yourself back in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The day is almost over, but what a day it has been – a day full of ups and downs! For you were part of the crowd that witnessed the out-pouring of the Spirit. You were part of the crowd that heard the Apostles preaching in your own tongue! Amazing, wasn't it?! But then again, you were part of the crowd that

heard a very disturbing message about Jesus – that He really was God’s Son, that He was risen, and that **“God has made Him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”** This cut you to the heart! How angry God must be! **“What then shall we do?”** you all had asked. Naturally, you had feared the worst! So what a relief to hear the good news: **“Repent and be baptized every one of you...so that your sins may be forgiven; and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone the Lord our God calls to Him.”** Had you heard right? God was willing to show mercy to those who had killed His Son? We just had to repent and be baptized? Well, you didn’t have to be told twice. Like the rest of the crowd, you did repent and get baptized. In fact, out 3,000 converts, you were Baptism #2876. That meant, of course, that by the time the Apostles got around to you, they were pretty tired. To them, you were just another face in the crowd. But as the water was poured upon your head, you knew that to God you more than a face in the crowd. You were special; this Baptism was unique. In this sacred moment, God the Father was telling you personally, **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine.”** In this sacred moment, Jesus was telling you personally, **“Whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has already passed from death to life.”** Also, the Holy Spirit was telling you deep down: *This is true! This is trustworthy! Jesus is your Savior and Lord!* Technically, you may have been Baptism #2876, but in God’s eyes you were Baptism #1 – and oh, did you know it!

You still know it! Want to know it! Want to know it for the rest of your life. But will you? Can you? And even now, you’re not so sure. For as the crowd starts wandering off, you find yourself standing there all alone. Your hair isn’t even dry yet, and now you’re all alone. So you start to wonder: *Is this how it’s going to be? Does feeling special and unique have a flipside to it? Does it mean I’ll have to stand alone from now on? Does it mean I’ll have to feel alone, trust God alone, and try to serve God alone? The experience was great, but is this all there is? And if not, what happens next?*

That’s a question for many Christians today. Coming to the Lord is great! Feeling special, forgiven, loved, and saved is great! But how do you maintain that feeling over the long haul? And how do you build upon it? How do you find the resources you need to live as God’s person, grow as God’s person, and finally die as God’s person? Trying to do that all by yourself is a pretty lonely undertaking! So, it’s natural to ask, and we need to ask: *What happens next?*

There is an answer, but to hear it clearly we’ll need to use our imaginations even more. So again, picture yourself standing there in the market place – freshly baptized, full of questions – and now one of the Apostles comes around the corner. Imagine it’s Matthias. Recognizing you, he smiles and says, *“Welcome to the family of believers! Welcome to the church of God!”* This greeting surprises you. *Family? Church?* You don’t quite understand. But this gives you

the chance to ask questions – not the least of which is your question: *What happens next?* As you talk about what you've experienced, you tell him how great it feels getting this individual attention from God, but also how lonely it feels experiencing it by yourself, and how you're wondering if this experience is it, just a flash in the pan. Matthias listens carefully. Then he tells you something that sounds strange but also comforting: *Each of us is special*, he says. *Each of us is unique. But we are not in this alone. When you were baptized into your personal relationship with God, you were also baptized into a big spiritual family – a relationship with all the other individuals who have a personal relationship with God. We call this family the church. And strange as it may sound, the way you'll best be able to live your life as an individual Christian is with support and encouragement from other Christians. You have a special place in God's church, and to keep growing the way you want, you need to claim that place and fill it the way only you can. But you don't have to do it by yourself. We'll do it together.*

You nod knowingly, but the expression on your face tells him you haven't quite understood what he said, so he wonders how to explain better. Pointing to a mosaic on a nearby wall, he says, *Take a look at the tiles. Do you see any two that are alike?* No, you don't. *They're all unique, aren't they? Each one fills a special spot where no other tile will do. In fact, do you see that one spot there where a tile is missing?* Yes. *Take a look at all the other tiles, and tell me which one could fit in there.* You realize that none of them could. So then Matthias bends down and picks up a tile off the ground. *I think this is the one that goes there*, he says. *It looks nice enough, though not that impressive. But it is unique. It does have its own special place*, he says, fitting it back in. *And along with all the other tiles, it makes a pretty impressive picture, doesn't it?* You agree. So Matthias says, *My friend, you are like this tile. You're special, unique, one of a kind, but you're not meant to stand alone. You have a special place to fill. You have a unique contribution to make. And you can only do it as part of something bigger, part of God's family, the church. If that's what you want to experience, come with me. I'll introduce you to the rest of God's family. I'll introduce you to some spiritual resources, too – ones that will help you find and fit into your special place. If you're serious, I mean. If you don't want all that's happened this Pentecost to just be a flash in the pan, that's what needs to happen next.*

And what did happen next? We don't need our imaginations to answer that. Our text makes clear that, far from trying to go it alone, those first Christians banded together and **“devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** There were some pretty amazing individuals among them. Mary and Peter; Philip and Dorcas; Stephen, Lydia, Paul. Actually, all of them were pretty amazing. And what a difference they made in the world around them! Or, to be more exact, what a difference they made together! That's not to say they always got along. Sometimes they made mistakes and hurt each other's feelings. But even so, they knew that they were stronger together than on their own, they could do more together than on their own, they would grow more together than on their own, so they stuck together,

learning and worshiping and serving together. In fact, they devoted themselves to that – **“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** The rest is history.

These days, people often look back and say, *“Why aren’t we more like the first Christians?”* And why aren’t we? Why aren’t we stronger, bolder, shaking things up, and making a difference the way the first Christians did? One reason is that Christians today are too individualistic. How often we hear: *I don’t need the church. I can read the Bible on my own. I can commune with God in nature. I can pray all by myself. I don’t need the church.* And so it may seem. You can do such things alone. But does that provide maximum resources for growth? Does that provide optimal conditions for effective living? If so, why did the first Christians manage so much better than we do? They could run circles around us – even handicapped by poverty and persecution! Why did they manage so much better? The secret’s no secret. Though they were amazing individuals, they weren’t individualistic. Together, **“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”** Jesus knew what He was doing when He chose to emphasize community – baptizing us into a family of believers, building us up in a body of believers, deploying us as a team of believers. To fully develop our unique potential, we need to be strong individual Christians joined together in a strong family of faith. That’s how we’ll grow and thrive and make a difference the way the first Christians did – as strong individual Christians joined together in a strong family of faith.

It really has to be both/and. That is so clear to me as I think about the young people who are being confirmed today. On the one hand, I see amazing individuals with great potential: **Michael**, so humble and good-hearted; **Allison**, so peaceful and patient; **Niisa**, so tender and nurturing; **Stefanie**, so bold and committed; **Trevor**, so loyal and mature; **Aleana**, so open and warm; **Kyle**, so positive and giving. They’re amazing individuals! They have such great potential! But how will that potential be fully developed? How will they grow the best and have the biggest impact on the world around them? Not by going it alone. By developing their strengths in community; by pooling their gifts in common service. And I could spin out similar examples for all of us.

We Lutherans have always emphasized the individual relationship with God. But we must not be individualistic. Luther also said, *“Ein Christ ist kein Christ”* – a lone Christian is no Christian. We really need to think both/and. And that is the challenge we take home with us this Pentecost. For the Holy Spirit to really work in us and through us, we need to treasure our Baptism, yes; treasure our unique relationship with God; treasure the fact that He loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love. But at the same time, we need to treasure the family we were baptized into – the church; treasure the opportunities for growth this community provides; and treasure what we can do together. That’s how the early church rocked the world. There’s no telling what difference we can as strong individual Christians joined together in a strong family of faith! Amen.

