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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/6/2011, Midweek Lent 4: Baptism

PRAYER OF THE DAY, LENT 4

☞ God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE

The Dominical Command to Baptize Matthew 28:18-20, RSV

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

The Dominical Promise Concerning Baptism Mark 16:12-16, RSV

¹²After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. ¹⁴Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at table; and he upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. ¹⁵And he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

The Meaning of Baptism for Daily Life..... Romans 6:1-4, RSV

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He who believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mark 16:16, RSV)

Let us not doubt the divine declaration. It is the high point of faith to take God *at his word*, and in Baptism, the triune God gives us his word. He means to save us. Henceforth, let us this be the solid foundation of our life. Many things in life can be doubted, but let us not doubt God's Word. If you have been baptized, your Maker has spoken to you. For the moment, he, as it were, set aside everything and everyone else - both high and low - and focused on you. He wants you to go through life knowing this: You are baptized and you will be saved, and he says so to you in your baptism.

In Luther's *Large Catechism*, Luther has a line about baptism that helps explain why I am a Lutheran. Let me immediately share that line with you, and then try to put it in context:

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, claim that faith alone saves and that works and external things add nothing to it. We answer: It is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—*something to which it may cling* and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be baptism... (Luther, *Large Catechism*, "Concerning Baptism")

By the phrase "our know-it-alls, the new spirits," Luther is pointing to radical reformers who doubted the traditional, catholic teaching on the sacraments. They discounted baptism, for example, because it seemed to them to be a poor, external thing, while they argued that what really matters is faith. Some of Luther's most brilliant and passionate theology is directed against these radical reformers, these "new spirits," as he called them.

But I do not need to speak of Luther's opponents here -- people like the great Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli. I do not need to speak of those folks because I myself was a "new spirit." Born and bred that way.

My wife, Carol, and our boys, Sam and David, were born Lutheran, but I was not. I was born a Pilgrim Holiness boy. That's because my father was a Pilgrim Holiness preacher and my mother was a Pilgrim Holiness mother. Dad and Mom met and fell in love at the Allentown Bible School, where Dad trained to be a minister and Mom trained to be a Sunday School teacher.

Nowadays, there are few Pilgrim Holiness churches left. Because of various mergers, most of them are now called “Wesleyan” churches. That is a good name for them because it points to the chief teacher in that tradition, John Wesley. The Pilgrim Holiness and Wesleyans, then, are part of the great Methodist tradition.

To my dying day, I bet I will retain affection for the good old Pilgrim Holiness Church. And yet, I am even gladder to be a Lutheran. That’s because the Pilgrim Holiness Church let me down in a time of spiritual crisis. And it did not fail me because of individual failures of piety. No. My pastor was wonderful, my mother was a saint, in my judgment, and the people of our congregation were beautiful Christians. If the Pilgrim Holiness Church let me down, it was not because of its people, but because of its principles. It illustrated exactly the kind of problem that Luther is referring to in the line I quoted above.

So, let me tell you the story. One day, my grandfather died. It was not unusual that he should die. He was an elderly man. But I loved my grandfather. He was a quiet man of the earth and the river. He was a fisherman, a trapper, and a truck farmer. I helped him with the chores. He was important to me.

Then, one day, we learned that he had died. I have always been a rather steady sort of guy, but the death of my grandfather knocked me for a loop. Grief was part of it, of course. Yet a bigger part was terror. My grandfather had died. I could be next. But I figured that I was not ready to die. The issue was not this present life. It was eternity. I judged that I was not ready for eternity. I knew that I was not ready to stand before the Judgment Seat of God. Too much sin in me. I knew that. I was about twelve years old, and I figured that I had done plenty of sinning in those twelve years.

Now, the thing that was terrifying to me was that I could not put myself right. I knew my Pilgrim Holiness theology. I knew that what I needed to do was to kneel down and pray, give my heart to the Lord, and wait for the assurance of God’s forgiveness in my heart. But I also knew from my Pilgrim Holiness theology that we are saved by faith, not by good deeds, not even by the good deed of kneeling and giving my heart to the Lord. Furthermore, I knew that we were supposed to come to God out of love for him, not as a strategy for evading hell. But I knew I was trying to evade hell. I was honest enough with myself to know that my repentance was not pure, that what was really moving me was not love of God, but fear of hell.

So, I could make no progress in my repentance. I wept, I prayed, and most mysterious of all, even the prayers of my mother could not rescue me. She knelt beside me, she prayed for me and with me, yet I could reach no peace. You people who have been raised in the comfort of God’s grace probably cannot understand my misery back then. But it was deep and urgent.

Then my father came up to my room and knelt beside me. This was a clear departure from my father’s spiritual discipline. As a young preacher, he had left the

Pilgrim Holiness Church and become a Catholic -- a stunning thing back in those days. So, Dad was a Catholic, but my mother remained Pilgrim Holiness and raised me and my little sister and brother in the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Dad honored her right to do that. So, on Sunday morning, he went to Mass in Denton, Maryland and we went to church at the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Greensboro, Maryland. Then we all met back home for a big Sunday dinner. And Dad and I played chess in the afternoon. That's how I remember our Sundays.

Dad, then, left the spiritual nurture of us children to Mom. But the death of my grandfather presented a spiritual crisis for me that even my mother could not solve.

So, Dad came to my room and knelt beside me. He asked me what was troubling me. I told him that my heart was not right before the Lord. I told him that my repentance was not pure. And Dad gave the right answer. He gave the Lutheran answer. He gave the Catholic answer. He said that the Gospel, first of all, is about Jesus and his love. And therefore, the Gospel, in the first place, is not about me and my heart. Therefore, it literally did not matter whether my repentance was pure or not. What mattered is that Jesus is good, that he loved him, and that I could rest in him.

It was like the sunshine suddenly dawning after a cold and dark night. At last, I felt some peace. At last, I was able to lift my eyes from myself and from my own struggles and to shift my eyes toward Christ, and in shift my eyes toward him, I found Someone worthy of living for.

What Dad did there is teach me what is called "the external nature of the Gospel." Notice the way Luther puts the complaints of his opponents:

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, claim that faith alone saves and that *works and external things* add nothing to it.

Again, Luther's opponents argued that it is not baptism that it is important, because it is a poor external work, but faith. Imagine lecturing Martin Luther about faith! Well, Luther answered, of course faith is the important thing. But then we come to Luther's great line:

We answer: It is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—*something to which it may cling* and upon which it may stand.

This is part of the genius of Lutheranism, in my opinion. It has remained true to the traditional teaching that faith must have something outside itself to cling to. Faith cannot focus upon itself. It cannot be based on anything so uncertain and so hard to

pin down as the state of my own heart. Faith must cling to God's Word, not the word of my own heart. And the great thing about Baptism is that it is God's Word connected with something external to us: to good, old-fashioned water.

You felt it. If you were a baby and the baptism water had not been heated up some, you might have cried a bit when you were baptized. That's because you were not *imagining* your baptism, or somehow *declaring to yourself* that the Lord loved you. Rather, you were actually being baptized and *the Lord* was declaring to you that he loved you.

Christian life ever afterwards is trying to live up to this reality. It is possible to "resist" this reality by turning to sin, but I must be frank with you: I think such resistance is something we are going to regret. I think we are going to regret it much as Peter did in his reconciliation scene with Jesus, when his Lord three times pressed the question upon him, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" (John 21, KJV) It was not an encounter that destroyed Peter. Indeed, he went on to become a saint. Yet, it is clear that Peter wished he had not denied his Lord.

Sin is all out of kilter with our dignity, for when we are baptized, we become followers of Jesus, seeking to become "little Christs," seeking to become evermore like Jesus himself. Our life's assignment by baptism is that we are to become better and to turn from sin more and more. Luther puts it this way:

Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride. This is the right use of baptism among Christians, signified by baptizing with water. Where this does not take place but rather the old creature is given free rein and continually grows stronger, baptism is not being used but resisted.

If we have been sinning, we had best confess it and repent, because that is the meaning of the baptized life.

Let me end with a word of praise of Baptism from St. John Chrysostom. It is a word of praise that Luther would agree with too, for it speaks of the "blessed exchange" which happens in baptism, when our sin and failure is replaced by Christ and the expectation of heaven:

Paradise was entrusted to us, and we were shown unworthy to dwell even there, yet He hath exalted us to heaven. In the first things we were found unfaithful, and He hath committed to us greater; we could not refrain from a single tree, and He hath provided for us the delights above; we kept not our place in Paradise, and He hath opened to us the doors of heaven.

And to him be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Hymn following the sermon, LBW 503, *O Jesus, I Have Promised*