

Buried by Baptism

Romans 6:1-11

This Spring, my oldest daughter, Mairead, had the opportunity to bring home a seedling from her school for us to plant in the yard in celebration of Arbor Day. We realized it was somewhat of a big deal when the paperwork for the seedling included a page to return to the school bearing our signatures which attested to our commitment to plant and care for the tree. With a bit of uncertainty, but buoyed by Mairead's interest and energy, Patrick and I signed the paper and sent it back to school with Mairead.

One evening, a few weeks later, long after this was out of my mind, I noticed a stick on top of the refrigerator. After a couple days I was straightening up and I realized that this stick was the seedling I'd signed for. Wrapped around one end of the seedling was a paper towel, that had once been wet inside a plastic bag, and was now only slightly damp. I was sure we'd already failed at this opportunity. But, just in case, I added some water to the bag and put it outside until we could plant it.

I'm sure it was another week until we planted it, during which time Mairead and I both continued to put water in the bag. When Patrick and Mairead finally got it in the ground I was certain that we were planting a dead stick and nothing would come of it. But Mairead was having none of my negative attitude, and she enthusiastically cared for that seedling, watering it and watching it daily. And then one day we noticed little buds, and before too long, those little buds were leaves. She was delighted and continued watching and watering her seedling each day. Over the next couple of weeks we watched as more leaves sprouted, and we began to think that this stick like plant might become a tree after all.

But alas, a few weeks ago we noticed that the leaves looked strange, and then they began to shrivel. It became clear to us that the seedling was dying. But why? After telling this story to a friend of mine, with far more experience than I, he suggested that it probably had been over-watered, which was very likely since Mairead had been tenacious in her care of the little tree. Water, the very thing that revived and kept the seedling alive as it waited to be planted, was the same substance that ultimately took its life away a few weeks later.

That life-giving and life-taking power of water is central to our understanding of baptism. The gentle waters that drip off the heads of infants and adults alike reflect a powerful force of nature and faith which is the foundation of life itself. Young and old can tell the stories of our faith and life which lift up this characteristic of water. Last Fall the Faith Village year began with the Exodus narratives of Moses, leading the people out of Egypt. We learned how the Red Sea parted, providing an escape route and new life for the children of Israel, while those same waters took away the life of the

pursuing Egyptian army. The upcoming Faith Village year begins with the narratives from Genesis and the story of Noah and the flood - another place we see the power of water to take away life, and also give life a new beginning. And, we need not go very far to see the power water has in life today: the gardens that surround my home over at Mossy Creek are flourishing because of the rains we've had this week, yet at the same time we're collecting Cleanup Buckets to assist in the effort to help those in the midst of devastating and life-taking flooding in the midwest.

The power to give life - and the power to take it away: water is the single element in the Sacrament of Baptism for the community of faith. And it is this power that Paul lifts up in the section of his letter to the church in Rome we just read.

It's clear by the way this section begins that we are jumping into the midst of a lively discussion about sin and grace. Paul's provocative question:

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?

gives us a fairly good clue that there was some skepticism within the church about Paul's teaching on the nature of grace. While grace cannot be earned, Paul explains a few verses earlier, it is made available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and indeed, available abundantly. His answer to his own question is equally provocative as he doesn't chastise their lack of understanding, but rather teaches by lifting up that which is already familiar.

By no means! ...we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead...so we too might walk in newness of life.

But he's doing more than restating what they know - the image that Paul is creating takes the meaning of baptism to a new level for the church. He moves away from baptism as an experience only of 'washing' and connects it directly to the salvation event of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ died for our sins and so in our baptisms, submitting to the power of water to take life away, we 'die' to a life that is held captive to sin, and are made alive to a life that is defined by grace.

This is a very significant shift for the church, because when something is dead, it no longer does what it did when it was alive. The seedling in our yard, is a stick in the ground. It hasn't grown any more leaves and in fact, simply becomes more dry and brittle as time goes on. Paul explains that if we have been baptized, then we can no longer live out of sin, because that part of ourselves is dead.

How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

There is no other way for us to live than to live out the grace of God in all we do and all we are.

Of course, that's easier said than done. We continue to find ourselves in places where we are agents of hurt, persecution and injustice without intending to be - in small and large ways; in places known and unknown, just by virtue of living out a regular day:

A word spoken inadvertently at the wrong time, in the wrong way can hurt a relationship;

In an effort to be good stewards of our resources we shop at a discount store, which often has complications in a world economy;

And something as simple as drinking a bottle of water, which is good for our bodies, has long lasting environmental consequences;

Both large and small things have affects in the personal and worldwide arenas of which we are part. And yet, we have been 'buried by baptism!' Our lives are grounded in grace, not rooted in sin! How can this seemingly perpetual cycle of acts and events which seem to oppose God's good intentions for the world He loves, reflect this new life in Christ Paul so earnestly lifts up?

I think the clue lies in verse 11:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ.

Paul is a realist and in his writings on sin and grace we get a glimpse of how he has passionately struggled in his own life with a desire to do what is right and his dismay with himself when he does what is wrong. This is a struggle that each of us can articulate on any given day in our own words. Each time we gather for worship in this place we acknowledge this struggle through our Confession of Sin which we pray in community with one another. But the confession always gives way to the Assurance of Forgiveness because just as Paul affirmed again and again for the early church, we also must be about the business of reminding each other that *we are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ* - even when our actions seem to deny that truth.

Recently I attended a conference during which we spent some time talking about those inevitable experiences of hurt and pain which are part of any group of people who live and work together. These experiences are inevitable because we are each different in how we work within and understand the world around us, and the particular things that we share as well. And, these differences will occasionally, if not frequently, mean that we find ourselves in some kind of conflict. In the midst of conflict an important starting point to a way through is always to assume that the best intentions are at work in whatever thing it is that causes us difficulty. That simple rule

speaks to me on a variety of levels, but I think it also provides a very mundane application to Paul's words in verse 11.

In our baptisms the old assumptions about life are gone. We no longer assume that we can't do anything right, nor do we assume that others can't either. Instead, we assume that God is at work in all things: the situations in which we fail or succeed; the places in the world where what we do has an impact; the people we don't know who are touched by our ministry and outreach. We assume that grace is making its way into all these things, changing lives just as God continues to shape and change us with each breath we take. To be buried by baptism is to know that hopelessness has been replaced by confidence in the God who sustains us through grace for a life of joy and service.

Let us pray...

O God, grant us the confidence to live as people who are not defined by what is right or wrong, but by the grace that invites us to live abundantly out of love and service to Jesus Christ; through whom we pray,

Amen