

LIKE WATER FOR BAPTISM PSALM 51

It is fun to watch the effect that children have on otherwise sane adults. For example, my mother never jumped up and down like a bunny rabbit until she became a grandmother. The story goes like this: She was babysitting her granddaughter when the toddler began to cry. Nana started hopping and singing. Then laughter burst through the little girl's tears.

Yes, children laugh at their parents and grandparents, and more times than not, everybody feels better because of it. This story also reminds us how fine the line between joy and sorrow actually is.

Now consider the effect of a baptism on the life of a congregation and the effect of the church on the life of the ones being baptized. It has been invigorating to feel the vibrations associated with the buzz surrounding the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism this morning and to watch how excited we are to welcome children into the family. The nursery has been spruced up, the toys disinfected, and a reception will follow this service of worship.

Why are baptisms so exciting? There is much to say on this subject. Here is one thought: Children, like Lydia Anne and Julia Lea Byrd, are palpable reminders of the gift of life, life that is given and life that is giving for the sake of the body of Christ.

And for this, we are grateful. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. This is the prayer of a people, God's promised and promising people, and this prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving. We give thanks over water, water that *The Book of Order* says "should be applied visibly and generously" (W-3.3605).

There is nothing magical about the water, and yet the absence of magic does not suggest an absence of mystery. Water is mysterious. This explains why some children (and adults) are afraid of water. As we will acknowledge in the baptismal liturgy, water gives life, as in the creation story. It also

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takes life. Ask anybody who was not on Noah's Ark or an Egyptian who chased Moses into the Red Sea. The other side of this story, however, is the assurance that the Lord provides. The Lord calls on the faithful to build arks and step into deep waters and to trust God to be God. Beneath and beyond the stories of pain, suffering and death, there is resurrection, and in the Sacrament of Baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised to share in his resurrection.

Lydia and Julia are being baptized, because God has given them to the body of Christ through the Lord's servants Jeanette and Lea: "Baptism signifies the beginning of life in Christ, not its completion" (W-2.3007). For Lydia and Julia, laughter and tears are only beginning, and the Spirit of God will abide with them, as it abides with us. In baptism, the church affirms its faith. We commit ourselves to discipleship and discernment, and we pray a prayer of thanksgiving for what is to come even though we are unsure of what that will be.

Notice the parallels to Psalm 51. Deep in the heart of this series of petitions is an affirmation of faith: "For behold, you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly." Behold. Look. Look at me. Look at you. Conclusion: I am not God. You are! God is within and beyond our grasps, and yet we are within but not beyond God's.

Psalm 51, as the story of our life together in Jesus Christ, begins on a note of mercy: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness" (not ours). Mercy is necessary, because inasmuch as we strive to fashion and be fashioned in the faith, we fall down. Sometimes we fall accidentally. Sometimes we slide head-first, and I think that it is more helpful to think of dirty laundry as dirty laundry rather than spend time gossiping about how the laundry became dirtied. The prayer in both situations is the same: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

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There is something awkward about this Psalm, especially as we prepare to welcome Lydia and Julia into Christ's one holy catholic and apostolic church, and this is its strong emphasis on sin. You and I sin, often boldly, but a baby in a diaper?

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther proclaimed emphatically, "Yes." Luther liked Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory." He also liked it when babies cried during their baptisms, because he regarded screaming as evidence that evil was coming out of them. I do not know exactly how I feel about that, but I do believe that sometimes sins that we commit and sins that are committed against us are purged through tears.

The psalmist prays, "Wash me through and through from wickedness and cleanse me from my sin." Wash me, because, like a baby, I am incapable of washing myself. Cleanse me, because I feel dirty. Forgive me, and help me to forgive myself so that I may bathe in the mercy of God's grace.

Then the psalmist confesses, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." It is? So wait, if my sin is ever before me, why I am confessing them? Maybe it is because I am standing in front of a mirror. Or it could be that whatever I know about sin I learned from out there. Why not both? How many of us are creative sinners? It seems to me that the church has a deep appreciation for the classics, you know: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride.

The story behind this Psalm is one that I would like to know. Obviously, it is a juicy one. Otherwise, the guilt would not be as pronounced. The Psalm alludes to David's relationship with Bathsheba, which is at least as scandalous as any story that appears in *The National Inquirer*. As Princeton Old Testament Professor Patrick Miller writes, "Clearly one of the primary reasons for the association of David in the psalm is the relationship between the psalmist's declaration 'against you, you only have I sinned,' and David's very straightforward response to Nathan's extended announcement of the Lord's judgment when David says simply, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' One may assume that in

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Psalm 51 the sins committed by the psalmist have had effect upon other persons, but they are seen entirely as sin against God.” For me, the point that is relevant to spiritual formation is that “the depth of the sin confessed...seems to match the depth of the sin committed” (and again, I am quoting Miller).

The God who knits us together in our mother’s wombs, the God who knows us better than we know ourselves longs to deepen us spiritually. Prayer deepens our capacity to feel and widens our capacity to love. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer waxes eloquently on the relationship between the Psalms and spiritual formation. He asks, “Who prays the Psalms? David prays...Christ prays, we pray. We---that is, first of all the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as he (or she) participates in Christ and his community prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself and wherever we consider all of this together we recognize the wonderful ways in which God teaches us to pray.”

It is possible that somewhere along the way, Lydia or Julia will ask one of us whom God has gathered here to teach her to pray, and even if that person is Jeanette or Lea, that question may be asked, because they are actively involved and engaged in the life of the church. Baptismal vows are to be taken seriously, and when they are, the church functions more like the family that God created and is recreating us to be. Please note that just as everybody participates in the baptismal liturgy, all of us are called to actively support Lydia and Julia’s life in Christ.

Since I have been away, I have collected a few more prayers (and I have even prayed some of them), and one that seems appropriate to share with you this morning is by Columbia Professor Emeritus Walter Brueggemann. It uses language from this Psalm, and it speaks to the uncertainty and fear that bubble just beneath the surface of our fascination with children. It bears witness to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and helps us to understand the promises that we make this day: “Every time we meet, we pray that you would ‘cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit.’

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We present ourselves for that strange interface between our thoughts and your spirit. We covet our thoughts that do not stay focused about getting out of church on time and errands to run after church and meals to purchase and folks to see; our thoughts reflect our excessive busyness that leaves us little time for our life with you. And beneath busyness our thoughts are preoccupied with hopes that linger in disappointment, with hurts that refuse to be healed, with guilt that does not easily yield to pardon, with estrangements that cut deep and remain open, with can-do confidence about power and energy and achievement. We think a thousand thoughts in a minute...of money and sex and control and loss and death and cell phones and loneliness and good food. And then you...you who give light and wind and life, you who watch over us with sustaining power and disciplining presence; you will us well and whole and by stealth turn our lives into freshness. We present ourselves, seeking...grudgingly...that you will equip us to relinquish thoughts that we have thought too long and too often, seeking that you will restore us to the joy of your presence, seeking that you will make things new in our stale, weary lives. What we seek, only you can give; What we ask, we cannot find ourselves; What we want is a gift and the open graciousness to receive it on your terms. Come Holy Spirit!" O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen.

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