

“WHEN THE SPIRIT SLIPS IN”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
October 27, 2013

Good morning. Welcome to all of you to worship this morning. It is so good to see so many visitors with us today on this special occasion when we baptize 5 children. It is a wonderful opportunity to talk just briefly about baptism, what it means and why it is so important—both for the children who are being baptized and for all of us to remember our own baptism.

To get into that, I want to start off with a story about one of my colleagues in seminary, who got assigned, as part of his seminary training, to be a chaplain in one of the hospitals in St. Louis.

I was not assigned to a hospital, but I was assigned to a nursery school to be the chaplain student to 4- and 5-year-old little boys and girls. To start with the story from there, when I went to that nursery school, I was a little disappointed because I really wanted to be on the front lines of social change, and I told the director of the program at our seminary that I wanted to be on the front lines. I wanted to work at the AIDS Clinic in St. Louis. That was where I was called, so she assigned me to the nursery school. I really didn't get that. I went down for my first day of training at the nursery school, and I didn't think that these 4- and 5-year-olds had much to teach me. After all, I was a seminary student. I walked into the class, and the first little 4-year-old boy came up to me and asked me the most tremendous theological question I have ever had. He asked “Teacher Tom, who is stronger, Jesus or Superman?” Being a good seminary student, I asked “Well, I don't know—what do you think?” He said “I think Jesus because he can sneak up on you and get you.” You can't see Jesus, but you can see Superman coming!

My friend, Ed, got assigned to a hospital. One of the duties of hospital chaplaincy is to, of course, be present in the emergency room when trauma comes in and out throughout the days and especially throughout the nights in Urban America. He shared with us that, one of the most challenging, powerful, and perplexing events that he had to face as a chaplain in the emergency room at 3:00 in the morning was to do emergency room baptisms for children who were probably not going to make it through the night. I asked him about that—why would that be such an important ministry and what was the motivation from the parents for wanting their child, who was perhaps not going to make it through the evening, baptized? Why did they want their child baptized? He said it was because they did not want their child to die and go to hell.

I want to start with that issue. Why do we baptize? Why do we baptize children? Why do we baptize adults as an insurance policy so they won't go to hell? My response to that (and I invite all of you to struggle with that) is simply to say that God would never intend that for a child being baptized or not, but we have been taught that somehow baptism might be an insurance policy, a magic trick, to protect our children from hell upon death. I think baptism is much more important than that. As I said before, God would not ever intend that for a child baptized or not, so why do we do baptism, and why is it critically important?

First, we do baptism because it is out of the tradition of Jesus, who was baptized by John the Baptizer in The Jordan. Jesus is baptized because, as a genuine human being, Jesus, through the baptismal moment, shares with humanity. Jesus is in solidarity with humanity in all of our joys and all of our struggles, thus Jesus is called Immanuel—“God With Us”. Baptism is a tradition that comes directly from Jesus being in solidarity with all of us in our life struggles.

Baptism of young children and infants (especially infants, but certainly young children as we are baptizing young children today) emphasizes that God loves this child, or these children, even before the child is capable of loving God. When a child is born, he or she is loved from the beginning, unconditionally, by God. When we baptize a child, as we will this morning, we are affirming, stating and claiming that this child is loved

unconditionally from the beginning because this child is a child of God, and it is through the ritual of baptism that we affirm that, so we believe in this Protestant tradition that infant baptism is about claiming God's love that is already there for these children.

Thirdly, baptism is the symbol of our death and our resurrection with Christ. We are, through the baptismal process, dying to our own brokenness and the fallen-ness of the world and making the claim that we are new and that we are not defined by our shortcomings. We believe very much that human beings are broken, that we are the product of the fall, if you will, that we are not perfect, that we are all sinners—to use traditional language—but in the baptismal moment, we are dying and rising with Christ and claiming a new life for ourselves. We do that as the body of Christ, as the church. We are claiming death to the old self and life to the new self. For children, of course, that is an orientation for how they will live and make that claim—death to the old, resurrection and new life to be claimed.

Two other issues related to baptism in our day, I think, are critical. These are claims of the baptismal moment that are about us and what we will grow into. Baptism is the symbolic ritual of entrance into the church, the local congregation, as a missionary community. That is to say that baptism sends the Christian out into the world to be an agent of redemption. As adults (many of us who were either baptized as infants or baptized later on in life), one of the things we are challenged with is to be agents of redemption for a broken world, so the baptismal font that we have here is a sending out point into the world because we are part of a missionary community. We are sent out to bring good news into the world, and baptism is the beginning of that journey. For young children, particularly as they grow into adulthood, they claim their missionary call.

Baptism is the entrance, of course, into the church, into a community of faith, and it is this community of faith that, in our day and time, lives in great tension with the world. Much of the language of traditional baptism is that baptism is an act of repentance, and repentance means a turning around, going in a new direction, to turn away from that which is darkness and turn towards the light, so we, as a baptizing community, are baptizing our members—our children, our infants and our adults—into a community that lives differently, that has a different set of values, and our set of values includes, of course, love, compassion, joy, peace, reaching out to one another, and generosity, so baptism is the way we begin the journey to become a different type of people. In the washing with the water, the washing of the Holy Spirit, that process begins.

Last, but not least, baptism is an act of the spirit. Something happens in the baptismal moment that we cannot account for. We trust that God's spirit is in this process, that there is a mysterious component that we affirm and believe and sometimes get glimpses of, that it is a moment of divine intervention. We, as the community that baptizes do it as an act of the spirit. It is a sacrament, a means of Christ, a showing forth of what we believe, so baptism is a wonderful moment in the life of any church. It is, most of all, when God is their presence. We affirm this child to God when we, as the community of faith, take responsibility for this child's growth and evolution and depth in their spiritual journey, so this is truly a celebration—a celebration of the church, a celebration of God, a celebration of these children, a celebration of who we are and whose we are, so we trust that the Holy Spirit is here with us today, and we give thanks to God for that Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tom Warren, Pastor