

Humble Waters

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, September 04, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Galatians 3:26-28

“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God faith.”

Today we are witnessing the Christian commitment in its fullness. Today we have all gathered around the waters, we have celebrated as Jennifer has entered into the waters, we have seen the miracle of baptism, and we have remembered our own baptism. We have witnessed and we have experienced the beginning of the Christian life in this service. Soon we are going to move from the pool to the table, we are going to sit with Christ, eat with Christ and remember, re-live that sacrifice Christ offers to all of us. As we did with the baptism, we will again remember and reclaim our own commitment to following, living with, and claiming Christ as Lord. This is Christianity in a nutshell; this is the complete fullness of the Christian story in one worship experience, in one worship event. Baylor professor and Baptist theologian Barry Harvey describes baptism and communion as the two poles of the Christian community. They are the boundaries that mark and guide our faith in the church, in following Christ.

Do you remember what it was that sent you to the waters? Do you remember what it was that brings you to the table? On this day, in this opportunity to live the commitment at the water and the commitment at the table, let's remember why we are Christians. Let's remember what it is that brought us to Christ, let's remember what it is that we are committing to. Let's remember what we have left and where we are headed. Let's hear this Christianity in a nutshell, the basic of following Christ and of living and dying for Christ. On this day when we are witnessing the Christian commitment in its fullness, let's remember and relive the basics of being a Christian.

Remember that we live in a world that has gone away from God's intended purposes. For the early Christians, the world was ordered oppression. Romans were considered full individuals by birth. Jews considered themselves better than Romans and all other gentiles through religion. Tax collectors, dignitaries, and leaders considered themselves better than everyone else through money. Women and servants had no class, no power, and were not considered full people. There was a constant vying for power and honor, and always at someone else's expense. This is what the Galatians community was coming out of – a time of Jews and Gentiles, Romans and others living in the world in a pursuit for power, for honor, and for control. Society may have seemed in control, but it was chaos, the anger, the swirling of vices used to justify ends.

And is it that different today? Do we not also live with similar pursuits? It is like we are all in a big pot swirling against the way God wants us to go. We are all swimming towards the center, which offers material success, which offers worldly power, which offers violence, hatred, and anger. We are all swimming towards the center, and it isn't what God intended, because in the center one person is always trying to be on top. In the center is a hierarchy. In the center is disparity. The closer we get the greater the injustice, the greater the oppression, and the greater the sins of the world. As we get closer to the center we become judged by our birth – ethnicity is judged, the color of your skin is judged, and people are categorized. As we get closer to the center we are judged as male or female, and women are always placed below the men. As we get closer to the center we are judged by our economic and social worth. Those who make more money are given more power and held in higher value by our society. We are in this big pot, we are living in a “mad, mad, mad world”, but unlike the movie it isn't very funny.

This it isn't the way God intended us to live, to exist with each other, and to be in community. God did not intend for us to swim to the center at the expense of others. God did not intend for us to alienate each other based upon our race, our sex, our class, or anything else about us. But we are caught in it, swimming in it,

racing for more, racing to make it to the center, and finding out that when we get there we are empty. We may find ourselves in that place with Citizen Kane surrounded by wealth, surrounded by power, but feeling very alone and longing for the peach and joy of his childhood – his rosebud – his sled. This is the world the early Christians lived in, it is the world we live in, a world of chaos, or hatred, or selfishness and oppression, swirling in a direction that only leads to death.

Maybe you have tried to swim the other way on your own. Maybe you have tried to even climb out of the pot, and take up a different life than where the world calls you. Maybe you tried to give up the material desires, maybe you tried to give up the anger, and maybe you have tried to give up the need to control others. But it is hard. It is hard to live in the world and swim the other direction. It is hard to respond to violence with peace, it is hard to respond to anger with love. It is hard to respond to hatred with mercy. Clint Eastwood's great movie, *Unforgiven* captures the difficulty of living a different life. He was an assassin, a hired gun who had tried to turn from his ways. He had children, he had lost his wife, and he tried to swim against the stream. But in the end he took up his gun again, for good or for ill is not clear.

Maybe you make up a list of rules to live by. You tell yourself that you won't cuss, you won't steal, you won't lie, and you won't think bad thoughts – no, you will be a person who lives a life free of sin. But can you do it on your own? Can you live a life free of sin? Can you live a life that goes in the way you think God wants you to go on your own? You might begin to resent these rules as you again and again fall short. You might begin to resent these rules as you face situations when the rules don't clearly fit. You might begin to feel guilty when you realize that you can't live a perfect life on your own, because you can always do better. You could always spend more time serving the poor, you could always spend more time with the oppressed, and you could always spend more time with the lonely. One of the gifts that I have received in my Italian heritage is guilt. The guilt of an Italian mother is rivaled only by the guilt of a Jewish mother. Never could I call enough, never could I do enough, never could I be enough – and it would always break my father's heart, not my mother's (I am, of course, exaggerating). This is what Kierkegaard calls the move to the ethical. It is that point when we realize that the life the world calls us to live is not a life worth living, and we try something different. We try to live an ethical life, an upstanding life. It may be at this point when we fully understand the meaning of sin: something that separates us, that turns us from God. Every thought, action, or inaction not only affects our relationships with our family, our friends, and our neighbors, but also affects our relationship with God. We desire to be with God, to walk in the way that God calls us to walk, but the broken relationship causes us to stumble and fall. Such hard truth comes to us and brings us to our knees in grief. The sins of the world, the sins of our own weigh heavy upon us and we wonder. We must wonder if it is ever enough, and if we do find ourselves fully back with the grain of creation as God intended.

Here is where Christ comes into the world and into our lives. Christ steps into the waters, he steps into the swirling and says follow me, I will show you the way. Christ comes to the sinner, to the oppressor, to the wasteful, the selfish, and says follow me. Christ comes to those of us who know that there must be a better way to live, those of us who are trying to swim the other way, who are trying to live the way intended by God, but keep falling back into the swirling waters, and Christ says take my hand and follow me. We may stop and say, what about our past, Lord? What about all the things we did that is not true to your will and the will of your Father? We have been overcome by the pull of the world so much, we have been overcome by the lures and temptations for power and might so often that it does not seem right for us to just follow you.

Maybe this was how Paul felt when he first decided to follow Christ. Remember that Paul was trying to go in a different direction from the world before he gave his life to Christ. That time when Paul's name was Saul, he was trying to live a righteous and just life in accordance to Hebrew law. But even in his efforts to do right, Paul still did wrong, arresting and persecuting Christians. He must have wondered how it was that he could then follow Christ after all that he did to those who claimed Christ as Lord. How could Paul, a persecutor of Christians, turn around become himself, a Christian?

Christ hears our calls, Christ hears our concerns, and offers us what the theologian Paul Tillich calls the ultimate revelation. Christ steps into the swirling mess, and is taken by the current, the current moving towards the center pulls him under, and he loses his life in the ways of the world. And then, three days later, Christ emerges from the waters full, alive, and made new. He took our concerns, he took our sins, and he took the sins of the world and fell into them, allowed them to take his very life. How can we follow Christ? Because Christ has made it true, real, and possible. Christ hears our calls for intervention, he sees the sins of the world pulling

us again and again, and instead of calling us out to be with him, he comes down into the world and into our lives. He lives our lives with us, and then takes upon himself all the guilt, all the grief, all the pain of the world, of our own lives and brings them to their natural end – death through his own death. Christ makes all things new, gives hope, and brings a faith that shows a new way.

Christ calls us, pulls us and brings us into something new, that which God intended to be. This is the new community formed by Christ. This is the garment the Galatians put on after baptism, the garment of forgiveness and acceptance. As Christ rises from the mix, the waters around him change, he can walk the other way, he can bring us another way. This is the life that Christ offers. It is a life that knows not the limitations of race, it is a life that knows not the limitations of social status, and it is a life that knows not the limitations of sexual identity, and it is as life that knows not any of the limitations placed upon us by the world. Neither Jew nor Greek, American or Canadian, Iraqi or Indian, all are one in Christ. Neither male or female, rich or poor, servant or master, all are one in Christ. Neither deacon or trustee or visitor, or long time member, or you or me, all are one in Christ.

This is the freedom and the life that we are given. But it goes further, for Christ was immersed in this culture of death, these swirling waters of chaos, and Christ came back. All that we do which contributes to this culture of death is forgiven, all that we do, which leads us away from the grain of creation as God intended is forgiven and will continue to be forgiven. We are not God's servants, but God's children through Jesus Christ. Martin Luther described it as no longer viewing the life of God as rules to be strictly obeyed, but as a way to live. We move from the student to the child living in God's will with joy and with hope. This is what God intended and this is where Christ leads us.

This is the church in the ideal; it is what we are supposed to be, who we are supposed to be, and how we are supposed to be. A community that knows not social, racial, or any other distinction but the identity we claim in Christ. This is the heaven on earth we look towards, and try to live.

Do you remember your own Baptism, do you remember entering into those waters, those humble waters and rising up again, committing to follow Christ? This is the commitment we saw today in the baptism, and it is the commitment I am calling you to embrace again. Remember your baptism. Remember the chaos, the sin, and the culture of death from whence you came, from where you grasped Christ's hand and said, "yes." Remember the forgiveness offered to you no matter who you were or what you had done. A song like "Amazing Grace" reminds us of that powerful forgiveness when we remember that the author of that song was a slave trader. If forgiveness could be offered to him, could it not also be offered to us? Remember that forgiveness and ask for it again and again.

Remember the hope, peace, and assurance Christ offers you. Through Christ, you rise from those baptism waters changed, and a part of a movement where all are children of God. Through Christ you are loved and cherished no matter who you are, where you came from and what you have done. Through Christ you are brought to equal ground with presidents and paupers, with the poor and the rich, with the educated and those who were not formally educated. Remember all the depth of your baptism, and you will begin to remember how humble those waters are. Remember your baptism, the commitment you made to be a part of this movement, to be a part of the body of Christ to be a part of the church.

Remember your baptism as you approach this table. Remember your commitment as you again fall on your knees to break bread with Christ. Remember the broken body, the sacrifice of the cross as you share the cup with the disciples, with the apostles, and with all of the church. Remember and ask yourself, are we being the people Christ has called us to be? Will Jennifer experience the acceptance, the love, and the grace of God through this community as Christ longs to happen? Are we still the same as when we rose from those humble waters, or have we slipped back into the swirling waters of chaos and death? Are we the church, the people, the community that shines with the love of God and the forgiveness of Christ?

We need to ask ourselves this question every time we gather at the table, every time we turn our eyes to the cross, every time we worship together and we need to remember that God forgives us, God loves us, and the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us back to be the people, the community God calls us to be. One in Christ. One in the Spirit. One in God. For Christ we live. For Christ we gather. For Christ we go forward. Let us be the community Christ calls us to be as we again remember our own baptism, as we again gather at the table, and as we again gather around cross and the empty grave.

AMEN