

Promises, Promises: The Celebration of Holy Baptism
Texts: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 145:10-18; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

This weekend we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism at both liturgies, welcoming Tyler and Renny and Elizabeth and Lillian into the Household of Faith—the Church. It is arguably the most important and holy thing the gathered community will do over the course of a year—as we make promises to these young people and as we renew the promises we made to God and to one another at our own Baptisms.

I sometimes hear people saying things like, “I was baptized a Methodist” or “I was baptized a Catholic” or “I was baptized an Episcopalian.” I try whenever I hear that language to gently correct it. We are baptized into one holy, catholic, and apostolic faith. Denominations are important and don’t get me wrong: I love The Episcopal Church very deeply. But The Episcopal Church and all denominations are means to an end: and the end is Jesus Christ. Baptism points us beyond our human limitations to a deeper and broader and more ecumenical vision of the Christian community than most of us usually think about. From the Armenian orthodox monk to the tent revival preacher in the Bible Belt, this liturgy dares to insist that we are One: One Body and One Spirit, with One Lord/One faith/One baptism. The challenge of trying to be a *particular* congregation in a *particular* place at a *particular* time is to not lose sight of that fact. I want us to try to teach Tyler and Renny and Elizabeth and Lillian to say: *I am a Christian*, who became a part of Christ’s one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church on a summer day in July at St. Francis Episcopal Church.

In a few moments we will renew the promises of the Baptismal Covenant that binds all who are followers of Jesus together. We’ll promise to do our part in seeing that these four are brought up in the Christian faith and life—and that with God’s help we will be the kind of people who will help them to grow into the full stature of Christ. If we let those promises sink in we realize what an awesome responsibility God has entrusted to us. Most of us are well aware of our own weaknesses. And yet we promise to bear witness to the love of God in tangible ways so that these young people grow up with an awareness of that love for them and for the world. (With God’s help.)

The words from St. Paul’s letter to the Church in Ephesus might function on this day as a kind of prayer: we bend our knees before God and recognize with St. Paul how God has created *every* family in heaven and on earth. Do you realize what a bold and radical claim that is in the world in which we are living? All kinds of people—including I must admit far too many so-called *religious* people—want to suggest that it is otherwise. That the world is divided into good and evil people/saved and damned/ right and wrong. That God is on “our” side and not on “their” side. But St. Paul prays to a God who is father (and mother) of us all. How can we live as witnesses to that truth on behalf of these young people? How can we do it so that we are not only saying it with our lips but living it with our lives?

Before you can say “amen” these kids are going to be teenagers. And teenagers have a very peculiar and important gift to offer the church. They can smell hypocrisy from a mile away. They note well the gap between what we say and what we do. So if we claim that there is one God—and all the people of the world are related—then the big question is this: do our actions reflect that faith claim? Because the promises we have made in Baptism ask us to “seek and serve Christ in *all* persons”—not

just the ones we like or agree with. We've promised "to strive for justice and peace among *all* people and to respect the dignity of *every* human being." Again, with God's help.

Today's gospel story—the feeding of the 5000—is almost certainly familiar to all of us as one of the few stories told in all four gospels. The story line in all of them is the same: the disciples fear that there isn't enough. That is a part of the human predicament of course. We worry that there will not be enough time or enough money or enough love or enough food. And in our fear and anxiety we begin to grasp and clutch. In all four gospels this story offers an antidote to fear and anxiety by inviting us to put our whole trust in God's grace and love—to trust that it is sufficient for us. And to see that there is more than enough when we learn to open our hands in love and share.

But the bonus to John's telling of the story is that John remembers that there was a little boy there who had five barley loaves and two fish. The next line provides an interpretive insight: "what are they among so many people?" It is tempting (and maybe even "normal") to think that in the face of such big challenges our little offerings are barely a drop in the bucket. Perhaps. But our drops create ripples and by the grace of God sometimes influence others. One little boy offers a few loaves and a couple of fish—it barely makes a difference. But it takes the power of one to unleash generosity in another little girl perhaps, who finds that she has something in her bag too, and so does that old man and that single-mom. And pretty soon there is a feast and leftovers to boot. That doesn't take away the miraculous power of prayer: it only insists that God answers prayer through mere mortals. If we want peace on earth we have to let it begin with us. If we want to feed the world we have to take the risk of letting go of our five barley loaves and two fish.

We make promises in Holy Baptism that we will be a generous people which is to say that we will not let fear and anxiety get the best of us. In this congregation and in this community we will disagree about the best way to achieve the goals of clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. We can and should argue about the strategies for accomplishing the goals. But the goal binds us together: the One who has called us by name and sealed us in Baptism has commanded us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the sick. We open our wallets and our lives to those in need because we are followers of Jesus, and because that reality takes precedence over all other claims on our lives. Together, we bear witness to a stingy and fearful world of God's abundant and generous love.

Finally, even on this day of celebrating with young people, the Bible gives us a harder text—a PG-13 text. The story of David and Bathsheba should come as a surprise to no one here, however. Does anyone still doubt that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? As that great theologian, Bruce Springsteen, has put it:

Poor man wanna be rich
Rich man wanna be king
And the king ain't satisfied 'til he rules everything.¹

Here is little David—shepherd-boy and giant killer. But he's all grown up now. It's springtime—the time when soldiers go out to battle. But rank has its privileges and David has forgotten where he came from and it's good to be king. He uses his office to keep him safe even as he sends the sons of

¹ Bruce Springsteen's "Badlands."

other men and women to die on the battlefield. This is a story about sexual misconduct to be sure; but even beyond that it is a story about the misuse of power.

As I reflect on this text in the midst of this gathering, it suggests to me that as Christians we cannot afford to be naïve about the corrupting power of human sin. We will not get it right all the time any more than David did: not as parents, not as a congregation, not as a denomination, and not as a nation. We will make mistakes; sometimes very costly ones. But if you remember how the story continues, it doesn't end with David's sin but with God's grace—which is always stronger than our weaknesses.

I don't think that you start teaching children the Bible with 2 Samuel 11. You begin with God's love and goodness; you sing with the psalmist in ways that cultivate gratitude and point to God's generosity. (Psalm 145) You teach them about that little boy in John 6 and you teach them to pray with St. Paul to one God who loves all the little children of the world. (Be they yellow, black or white they are precious in his sight.) But the time will come when they, or we, will really mess up. Even if we read all the right books and are "perfect" parents our kids are not robots. It will not go all according to plan. There will be challenges and failures that will bring us up short. In those days we will need to know about the PG-13 texts as well—the ones that are brutally honest about human weakness and infidelity. Because these are the stories that teach us to sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me..."

Promises, promises. We make promises today and we pray that God will give us both the desire and the strength to keep them. But what we need to know above all else is that ultimately the promises we make here, on this day, do not rest on our shoulders alone. *God is faithful*. God will keep these promises even when we can't. That is good news. May it give us the will to keep on trying.

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