

May 26, 2013

**The First Sunday after Pentecost**

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector*

I am never more in love with the Christian community or prouder of our church than on baptism Sundays. Don't get me wrong, there are some great church celebrations around here, deep and wide with theology, purpose and joy. I love them all. But there is something particularly special to me about baptism days. I was baptized alongside my little brother here at All Saints' when I was 9 years old. The banner still hangs in my room at my parents' house. To be honest, I don't remember much about it except I wore a white eyelet dress my grandmother made and I had a hard time getting my glasses dry afterwards. Barbara Brown Taylor signed my baptismal certificate. From my godparents, I got a little black prayer book with gold edges that I still use when I go on pastoral visits.

That day, that moment of my own baptism didn't really impact me in any significant way that I remember. Since I was an older child, I probably had to answer some of the baptismal covenant on my own, or at least nod my head to say yes, I did want to be baptized. But of the water, the anointing, the singing of the song, the welcoming the newly baptized, I have no recollection. To say that I experienced some kind of life-altering change would be disingenuous and trite. But I can look back on my life and know that my baptism has shaped me. Baptism is one of the two sacraments recognized as such in the Anglican church. The other is the Holy Eucharist. We believe that the sacrament of Holy Eucharist should be taken as often as we can get our hands and hearts on it. It reminds us of not only the great sacrifice made for us but also the great love that God has for us. It reminds us that we are one community together and that our differences—across time and across space—are miniscule when we kneel at the table. We need those reminders again and again to keep the community whole and holy and to know beyond a doubt that we are beloved though broken.

Baptism, on the other hand, happens once. Once, for all and forever. We believe that the sacrament of baptism—the water, the oil, the promises the prayers—is indelible. There is nothing we can do to wash it off or wear it out. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves unworthy of the sign of the cross on our foreheads. Once. Forever.

It is through our baptism that we are adopted into God's family, the church. In our baptismal covenant we make promises to look to the apostles for guidance, to resist evil, to proclaim the Gospel, to see Christ in everyone, and to work for justice and peace. We promise to do all of these things and while the water happens only once, we are reminded of our promises and renew them over and over, every time we have a baptism, every Easter, every confirmation.

They are weighty promises, overwhelming and maybe even terrifying if we take them seriously. But the answer we give is as important as the promise we are making: I will *with God's help*. There is nothing in the entirety of Christendom that we are asked to do alone. So long as we accept the help offered, we will be able to uphold the weighty promises we make.

I know the moment of my baptism launched me on a journey.

I'm not necessarily talking about the journey to seminary and ordination.

The day of my baptism set me squarely on the path of a life lived as a Christian. A follower of Christ. One formed by the Table and the Community, the bread, the wine and the water, one known as beloved of God. My baptism did lead me into ordination in the same way your baptism lead you into a life of service to your family, to the Hippocratic oath or to taking the bar. I've gone far astray of the path on well more than one occasion and I know you have, too. But for all of us, our baptisms, whether we remember them or not, are the first steps into a path full of choices, accompanied always by God and a cloud of witnesses who have vowed to help steer us in those choices.

Which brings me back to the beginning, to why baptism Sundays are so close to my heart, so moving for me. And here it is: on baptism Sunday, parents are bringing that thing which is most precious to them, their children, and they are entrusting them to this community. Parents and Godparents will stand here this morning, before God and all of us, and place their child's spiritual upbringing in our hands.

But incredibly, it doesn't end there. After they offer us this gift, *we accept it*. On behalf of the whole Body of Christ, we promise to raise these children to the light of Christ, to raise them to love one another, to show them how to bring goodness into the world, to teach them how to worship, praise and honor the God that made them and loves them.

And, as I have seen in this community, the miracle that is the sacrament of Baptism *doesn't even end there!* After we make these heavy promises before God and to these children, we here at All Saints' *follow through*. Have you heard our children's choirs? Have you seen our pilgrims returning radiant from foreign lands? Did you hear the sermons from our seniors a few weeks ago? When we as a parish community keep up our end of the baptismal promises that we make with these children, *the world is changed for the better*. I have witnessed it. And you have too.

Our baptismal certificate is not a map any more than our baptismal covenant is a step-by-step instruction manual. Having your child baptized this morning will not guarantee them an easy life. On the contrary, we are baptizing your child into a community full of questions that lead to more questions, a community full of

personalities, passions and pitfalls. In other words, a community of God's beloved children. A great cloud of witnesses.

So I can't and won't promise you perfection in this baptismal journey. But I will promise you this: If you show up, we will too. If you bring your children into this community with constancy, we will listen to *their* questions. We will teach them what we know. We will get to know them and we will love them, right alongside you, into the amazing adults they can become. We will point them towards that which is of great and ultimate value. We will do our best to show them Christ.