

A Sermon Delivered by
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“For truly I tell you, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” ... (Mark 9:38-50)

OK – I know what you're thinking. Didn't we see this guy leave St. Peter's just a few months ago, and wasn't he the same fellow who came back to preach at a wedding just a few weeks ago at the end of August from this very pulpit? What's going on here?

Well that's a good question. Let me say right at the outset, I didn't write this script; and in fact that's what I want to talk about this morning in the time I have available to me. Who is it that really writes the scripts of our lives? And who, or what, is the ultimate source that determines the destiny of all of us in the world as we know it? It's a big question. Essentially this is a sermon on Christian initiation – or what we refer to in the church as holy baptism. At core, it's about who we are.

Today's Gospel gives us a clue to what's going on in our lives. Jesus says, “For truly I tell you, whoever gives a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” What this suggests is something crucial about our identity – in fact, our specific identity as Christians. And it also suggests something about what we do and how we behave in the name of Christ, the very same person who informs us of our identity.

As many of you know (that is, if you paid attention during the time I was with you earlier this year), I feel strongly the most important liturgy in our Prayerbook is that of Holy Baptism. That is where we are marked as Christ's own forever. Any occasion we might have to renew our baptismal covenant, is an opportunity to get in touch once again with our basic Christian principles, our religious orientation, and our spiritual authority. Why is that so important?

Well as they used to say in those introductory courses we all took back in school years ago – “let's review the previous material.” In the case of any given individual Christian, that means going back to the point where he or she was welcomed into the fellowship and community of faith. But let's be clear about what actually happened then.

In baptism, most of us quite likely were presented by our parents and godparents as infants. I have no idea what my baptism was like because I was so young. I simply don't remember it. Developmental psychologists tell us that most people can't recall events prior to age 2, maybe a few vague impressions, but even on those rare occasions when our memory seems to be working overtime, the images are invariably blurred and

unreliable. Nonetheless, something very significant occurred when we were splashed with the waters of baptism: and whether we were fully immersed in a creek outdoors as the Southern Baptists prefer, or gingerly held by the loving hands of careful clergy and adoring parents at the baptismal font in a local church - something “everlasting” happened. We were baptized with living water, and marked as Christ’s own forever.

I stress all this because the point of our lives is simply that - it isn’t about me, it isn’t about you, and it isn’t about anyone we know in particular. It’s about God, and maybe even more to the point, it’s about God’s son, Jesus. Note carefully that in baptism the water is blessed in thanksgiving as a gift (over it the spirit moved in the beginning of creation, through it God led the children of Israel, in it Jesus himself was baptized, and in it we too – in a strange way - are buried with Christ in order to share in his resurrection). The water of baptism is poured over us so that we are both cleansed and prepared for a critical task in life. We weren’t just baptized, or “dedicated” as the Unitarians like to say, we were *commissioned* to do the work of Christ. In fact, there is only one ministry of the church, and that’s Christ’s ministry. Baptism empowers all of us to engage in that ministry; and it’s interesting how vows are given that bind us forever to a clearly higher spiritual form and differentiated way of life – a life of faithful obedience to God, a life following God’s commandments, and a life with a fundamental promise to love our neighbor as ourself. No easy task.

So right from the start, often without our awareness, there are expectations of how we are to behave, and what we are to believe. Furthermore, vows are made, or pledges are taken on our behalf, that we will live out those convictions all the days of our lives.

So my first point is simply this. Though I think I have unlimited potential and free will to make anything I want of myself; the truth is, I am utterly dependent on God, and related interdependently to everyone else on Planet Earth. I cannot sustain myself, or live in a vacuum. I need God, and I need people – or as Barbara Striesand used to sing – “people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world.”

True enough. But it’s more than luck. There is intentionality, purpose, will and resolve – each of us uniquely has a part to play in this wonderful mystery called life... which brings me to my 2nd point. By now you are probably wondering how many points this sermon has. But relax: because this is really only a two-point sermon.

In baptism, a central piece of the liturgy sometimes goes unnoticed. After everyone has gathered around the font, the officiant is instructed by the rubrics to say clearly – “the candidate for Holy Baptism will now be presented.” Then turning usually to the parents, although sometimes to the candidates themselves, the priest says -- Name this child. Give this person a unique Name; not just a surname.Name this child.

Why is this so important? It is important because we live in a secular culture where names are becoming increasingly insignificant, and far less reliable than other identifying criteria. We live in a world that necessitates security codes, passwords, social security numbers-last 4 digits, Credit Card 3 digit authorizations, PIN numbers, email addresses,

Fax numbers, cell phone ring-tones, or even the old fashioned standard, home telephone numbers. The list proliferates and goes on and on and on.... I concede, these codes work fairly well for security purposes. But they're not our NAME.

In the face of this depersonalization, the only institution I am aware of in today's world that cares about your Name is the Church. You are identified as Christ's own forever when you are given your Christian name, and that matters because Christ has made a binding claim on your life for eternity.

Symbolically, what follows then in the baptismal liturgy is a whole series of questions about being responsible for seeing that the *named* child is brought up in the Christian faith and life, and that through prayer and support, the child will grow into the full stature of Christ; and so on...

Well I've spent a lot of time on the theology of baptism, and we're not even baptizing anyone today. But I trust the discussion goes to the heart of the matter about who writes the scripts of our lives. Obviously, on the surface it seems, we do; yet we do so to a lesser extent perhaps than we might think. God is the true author. The cloud of witnesses, the martyrs and the various heroes of faith who have gone on before us, they too have affected our lives and may have influenced us more than we realize. Of course our families, especially our parents, and our immediate friends have had a profound effect upon us, and they have had a lot to say about who we are and where we are going in life. But in the final analysis it is our Baptism that defines the moment when we were given a purpose greater than ourselves, a reason for living which is more cherished and worthy than mere existence or survival. In baptism we are called into lives of perfect service as ambassadors of Christ. That's indelible.

Let me close then with a quote that actually comes from outside the church. It gives us a bit of perspective on who is in charge of our lives. It is by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a freelance writer, who says:

The greatest obstacle to faith in our time may be that most of us are too invested in securing our own futures to trust Jesus for the good life he wants to give us right now. It's not that we want to reject Jesus; most of us want more than anything to trust God's abundance. But instead we are constantly dazzled by earthly treasures and their promise to make the world safe and enjoyable for us.but simply stated, that's just not the case. Earthly standards and values are destined to fail.

Each of our lives is precious in God's eyes, and we need to discern the script that God has authored for every one of us, individually. Remember, God has numbered the very hairs on our head. Through prayer, imagination, sound planning, and responsible deeds of goodness and love, we can go a long way in perfecting the kind of person we choose to be. Yet in the final analysis, we acknowledge our submission to God's will and recognize God's divine purposes for us, as we seek to implement God's plan by making a difference in the world through love and kindness. Sounds easy, but it's a formidable and challenging task. I encourage you to risk becoming a new person, claim the authority that

is rightly and religiously yours, and grow into the full stature of Christ.

You have been Named in Baptism by the One eternal and everlasting God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.Amen

CREDITS:

(Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Christian Century Sept 8, 2009)