

Pentecost 5B  
Baptism Sunday  
The Rev. Emily Richards  
July 9, 2017

*Red Thread Sacrament*

We were exiting the plane in Philly when I told Daniel I wanted to go back to China someday. Having just completed almost twenty-four hours of traveling this may not been the best time to announce my intention. A week of struggling with jet lag curbed my initial enthusiasm, but just a little. China is an extraordinary place, full of contradiction. On the one hand, it's like going back to early twentieth century America; and on the other, it's more modern and more open to global change than we Americans are. The people are fascinating and beautiful and a little quirky. And as much as we were able to experience in two weeks: The Great Wall and The Forbidden City, pandas and acrobats and rickshaw rides and dumpling banquets I left feeling there was so much more to do and learn about this country. But it wasn't these things that were drawing me back. It was the orphanage. The place my precious daughter had called home for the first year of her life. I want to spend more time in Chenzhou, wandering its city streets and exploring its surrounding hills, playing and laughing with the children who call the Chenzhou Children's Welfare Institute their home now, and hearing more stories from the women and men who care for them and who cared for my child ten years ago.

Upon first entering the orphanage, our guide pointed up to a big, electronic sign hanging over its entrance with many Chinese characters. WELCOME! our guide translated to us. And then she told us that each of the six girls' names were listed. But they weren't Maggie and Lily, Charlotte and Audrey, Sarah and Ella. Instead they were each listed by their Chinese names. And at the very end was Wan Zhen, our Maggie. Her name then and her name still now. Throughout the visit each of the girls was called by their given Chinese name.

One of the customs we participated in on our journey was that of gift giving. For the Chinese it is a sign of appreciation upon beginning a new friendship. So, after all six families gave our American gifts to the Orphanage directors and nannies and government officials, it was our turn to receive. The girls were handed bags with their Chinese names on them and inside were identical, red t-shirts with the outline of China in white. And at the place where Chenzhou would be located was a red heart. At the bottom of the shirt in both Chinese characters and English words was written WELCOME HOME. Once the girls had put on their shirts, each of us parents, and other

family members gathered with them were handed our very own. In that moment, I realized that through my daughter I, too was being welcomed home. We were all part of the same, big, CRAZY family! There's a Chinese proverb that says: *An invisible red thread connects those destined to meet regardless of time, space or circumstance. The thread may tangle or stretch, but it will never break.* On this day, our red threads had become a little more visible.

We gather here this morning as a part of the big, crazy family called the Church to celebrate our red thread sacrament: Baptism. When Alexis and I met with Angelo and her mother for the first time, figuring out together whether St. Peter's would be the right fit for her and her son and talking about his possible baptism, Alexis asked me what the requirements were. "Requirements?" I responded quizzically. "Baptism is a gift of the church, a gift from God. It is pure grace. Requirements for living the Christian life will come later. They are all spelled out beautifully in the Baptismal Covenant. But for now. For this moment. It's about celebrating your precious, miraculous, beloved child."

The water and oil and words of baptism are the equivalent of that big, electronic sign proclaiming, Welcome! Welcome home Home Angelo Isaiah Molina, the newest member of God's household! And welcome home to you Alexis and to you godparents and grandparents and all those friends and family who love Angelo. You're now part of this family, connected to us at St. Peter's by that invisible red thread that is God's grace in baptism.

"The waters of our own baptism are meant to stir our communal memory," writes blogger Shawna Bowman – "to connect us to the God story that can hold our story and the next person and the next person's story... until they are all woven together into one big beautiful, mess of a story and we don't know who's is whose and we can't separate ourselves out or line ourselves up according to who's the best or smartest or strongest or most deserving and so we all have to accept the fact that when God calls out you are mine, you are beloved,...that God is talking to ALL of us." I imagine the red thread of baptism weaves in and around all of us here in this place, but does not end with us in these pews. It stretches far beyond us and out into the world connecting us and our stories with those we never imagined we'd know or be connected to. I envision that as the red thread weaves us together a tapestry is being created. This tapestry is constantly growing, constantly changing its patterns, constantly adding new stories and details, but it is never breaking. The tapestry just expands into an ever more elaborate and beautiful work of art.

In *Life of the Beloved* Henri Nouwen says that “When we claim and constantly reclaim the truth of being the chosen ones, we soon discover within ourselves a deep desire to reveal to others their own chosenness. Instead of making us feel that we are better, more precious or valuable than others, our awareness of being chosen opens our eyes to the chosenness of others. That is the great joy of baptism: the discovery that others are chosen as well. In the house of God there are many mansions. There is a place for everyone - a unique, special place. Once we deeply trust that we ourselves are precious in God's eyes, we are able to recognize the preciousness of others and their unique places in God's heart.”

As God's baptized people, we are called to recognize the preciousness of every human being, especially those who look different from us and talk different from us, those who live worlds away and those in our own neighborhoods we've grown accustomed to ignore, those who have been shaped by different values and customs and political beliefs. For God's sake, for our sake, we need to be able to look into the eyes of our brothers and sisters and see them as God sees them. Angelo's baptism gives us the opportunity to reclaim the truth that there is a place for everyone in God's house. All are welcome! Regardless of time, space, and circumstance the red thread of God's grace weaves us together, binding us to one another for eternity and beyond. May we have many sacramental moments in our lives, in which we catch glimpses of that red thread, discovering again and again the beauty and belovedness of one another. Amen.