

UMC of Auburn – 7/17/16

MESSAGE: “Alive in Christ”

Text: Romans 6:1-11

***Purpose:*** the purpose of this message is to invite the Auburn congregation to renew their faith through heightened expectations of baptism.

***Introduction***

- I. What is *baptism*?
  - A. God’s Doing
  - B. Death and Resurrection
  - C. Alive in Christ

***Response to the Word: Remember your baptism and be thankful.***

About ten years ago, just after New Year’s, I received a phone-call that broke my heart. One of Littleton’s youth, recently graduated from High School, just 17, had been killed in an auto accident on her way to work. Blinded by a snow-squall, she lost control of her vehicle and collided with a tree. Would I officiate at the funeral? Swallowing my emotions, because I, too, had a 17-year-old daughter, I said, “Of course.”

The next morning, bolstered by prayer, I met with Carol’s parents and older sister. They were devastated, but fully participated in planning her memorial service, which was scheduled for the following week. After returning home to begin preparations, I received a second call from Carol’s father. “Would it be possible,” he pleaded, “for me to meet them (father, mother and sister) at the funeral home in order to baptize his precious daughter and the three of them as well?” With one desperate request, I felt the theological rug pulled out from beneath my feet.

A tangle of cautions ricocheted in my mind: “Methodists don’t baptize the deceased!”, “Baptism should be a celebration not a moment of mourning!”, “What could such a baptism mean?”, “How will they respond if I refuse?”, “What will the body look like, since it hasn’t been prepared?”, “What if it was my daughter?”, “How would I feel?”, “Can there be a baptism without someone from the church being present?” No seminary course or simulation prepares you for such a moment.

Even in relaxed conversations with folks regarding baptism, I find there is often great confusion. What exactly happens in baptism? Don’t I need to get my child “done,” for the benefit of God’s grace? Does it matter if it is by immersion, pouring or sprinkling? What age is best? The questions invite further questions, it seems. Too often, the baptism is casually considered, and the guardians who pledge to bring the child to Sunday School are

not heard from again, or the congregation that pledges to support him or her in Christian formation does little to help them return.

Jesus understood the significance of baptism. Before he preached his first sermon, he went to the river Jordan to be baptized by his cousin, John. And though he, himself, never baptized anyone by water (at least, not that we know of), he gave the command to his followers to, “Make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 28:19). For Jesus, baptism was a powerful sign of God’s presence in a person’s life.

What, then, is baptism? To seek an answer to that question, I invite you to read with me from Paul’s letter to the church of Rome, Romans 6:1-11...

In his book, *Stories for the Gathering*, William White relates a story of one preacher’s growth in understanding baptism. Mary Lawson, a first year seminary student did supervised ministry with Pastor David Zwanziger. She was impressed by his preparation of adults for baptism. David told the class, “Baptism is serious business. You are inviting God’s Spirit into your lives, and often, the Spirit makes dramatic changes. Baptism is rebirth. You may never be the same again.”

“I haven’t heard it spoken of in this way before,” Mary remarked, “did you learn this in seminary?”

“No,” David replied, “I learned it from my mechanic.” Mary looked perplexed, and he began to tell her about Janice and Loren Getter. “It all started when Janice walked in my office and cried, “My life is a mess! I’m 25 and raising four children!”

David was puzzled. “I thought you had three girls.”

“I’m counting my husband, Loren!”

David nodded. He realized Loren often acted as a child. In one man’s words, ‘Loren never did learn to walk. He strutted from the day he was born.’

“Pastor, Loren can’t keep a job. He knows better than anyone else, and tells them so, even his employers. Living with him isn’t easy. Something’s gotta’ change.”

David encouraged Janice to bring Loren with her for a counseling session. When he arrived, he started in, “I’m here to help Janice with her problem...” It was all down-hill from there.

Janice interjected, "I feel like I'm raising the girls by myself. You don't go with us to school or to church or to visit my family..."

"The reason I don't go to church is, I ain't baptized. I don't belong."

Loren soon grew tired of the meetings, but he knew he couldn't quit unless something changed. Then it hit him. Why not be baptized? It would thrill Janice, please her parents, and give him an 'in' with the pastor. He was a bit taken aback when he learned he would have to attend a three-session class led by the pastor, but the counseling would end, and it would be over in no time.

One day after work, Loren drove his car to Maynard Lennox's garage. Maynard, a quiet man with a hearty smile, worked in a garage near his home and often let young men in the community use his tools and equipment to do minor repairs. "Mind if I come by tomorrow to finish this job?" he asked Maynard, "I can't do it now because I gotta' meet the preacher at 7.

"You've been in church every Sunday for a few weeks," Maynard observed.

"What a man won't do to get some peace at home. Janice has been ornery ever since the birth of our latest. I got it all worked out, just three night sessions with the preacher, and I'm gonna' get baptized. It's no big deal and makes a bunch of people feel good."

Maynard's smile disappeared. "I'd be real careful about baptism. I wouldn't take it lightly—it can change a fella, forever!"

"What are you talking about?" Loren protested, "All I'm doing is having a little water sprinkled on my head with a few religious words from the preacher. That don't amount to much."

Maynard looked serious. "Baptism isn't something you do. It is done to you. In baptism, God makes you over. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit. You're dealing with things not of this world. You'd better ask the pastor."

Loren asked at the next session, but the preacher didn't understand what he was asking and Loren let it drop. When he saw Maynard again, he told him what happened.

"I don't understand ministers," Maynard said wiping grease off his hands on an old rag. "Often they deal with powerful things of the Spirit as if nothing was going to happen. They

serve communion like a bored waitress, and baptize with as much enthusiasm as a five-year-old who was just told to take a bath. Listen, when the first Christians talked about baptism, they used words like *rebirth*, *drowning*, *crucifixion*, *cleansing*. They spoke of powerful stuff. The church expected the one being baptized to be changed. “If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation,” Paul said. Or again, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” They were drowned before they were brought back to life—death and resurrection. With their new life, they received a new name.”

Maynard picked up another rag and continued wiping, “Through baptism, lives get turned around. People are born anew. I’m one of them. When I was 19, I needed to get out of the house. The quickest way was to get married, but Barbara insisted I be baptized. When I asked the preacher, he said I wasn’t ready—that I really had no clue. After many conversations, he agreed to baptize me, two weeks before the wedding.”

“Did it change you?” Loren wanted to know.

“No,” Maynard answered truthfully, “I stopped going to church as soon as we got married and lived as I wanted to. Barbara said I was irresponsible and self-centered—that I was a rotten husband, and I probably was. I certainly wasn’t much of a worker. But then Goldie Olson died, a neighbor and second-mother, a saint if ever there was one. At her service, the preacher said, “Her baptism told her who she was and whose she was.” For weeks after the funeral, I wondered if I would ever know who I was.”

The old mechanic paused to get his facts straight. “Then one night a bunch of us were fooling around with water balloons. One broke over my head. Everyone laughed and a buddy said, “I just baptized old Maynard” and formed the sign of the cross. Then I thought, ‘That sign is precious to me.’ I wondered if I had what Goldie had. I went to the preacher’s house (it was about midnight), rang the bell and he appeared in his pajamas. “Pastor, I haven’t thought about my baptism since it happened. Is it still valid?”

“Yes, Maynard” he said, “God keeps his promises even when you don’t. Besides, baptism doesn’t depend on you anyway. It is something done to you by God. Maynard, you are royalty, a child of the King. Now go home and go to bed.” With that, he shut the door.

The mechanic broke into a grin. “Child of the King. I couldn’t have felt better than if I had won the lottery. I had family. I wasn’t a homeless, illegitimate child. I was claimed, signed, branded. I was royalty. I went home to tell Barbara and we were tender together. About 3 am, she confided, “There is more you need to know. You’re going to be a father. I’m three months pregnant.”

**“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I asked.**

**“Because you ignored me so much lately that I was thinking of moving away.” Maynard just smiled and rubbed the grease off his hands.**

**“That’s a fine story,” Loren interrupted, “but why is baptism dangerous?”**

**“It changed my life,” Maynard insisted. “It changed my friends. Old ones left and I gained brothers and sisters. I’m not complaining. I found family. I’m just saying, weigh the cost.”**

**“Blazes, Maynard! I have lots of buddies who are baptized, and they’re just like me. I don’t see no difference in their lives.”**

**“Oh, it is possible even for royalty to live as though they were trash, but at any moment, the Spirit might start working on their life and they could change.”**

**Pastor David concluded his story. “When Loren came to the last session, he talked without his usual bluster. He told me of his conversation with Maynard. It was clear that Maynard had taught him more about baptism than I had.”**

**“What about the baptism itself?” Mary asked.**

**“Loren was frightened. He could barely speak. He didn’t strut when he came forward. Maynard was his sponsor. Loren’s no saint, to be sure. Baptism doesn’t give a personality transplant. Besides, we all start at different places, but Loren did change. He now lives with a sense of gratitude and a need for forgiveness.”**

**“So you’re convinced it is the work of the Spirit rather than the power of suggestion?” Mary persisted.**

**“I don’t pretend to understand everything that happens,” David replied. “This much is sure, the Spirit used Maynard to help Loren and me. I now approach the sacraments expecting something to happen. I’ve learned baptism deals with death, birth, rebirth, drowning and cleansing. I know that when I baptize, I am dealing with things beyond my comprehension. God’s goodness and grace are at work. That is why I tell people that baptism can change their lives.”**

**Oh. You may be wondering how I responded to the father who asked me to baptize his family at the funeral home. I decided to follow Jesus' strategy: compassion first, teaching second. I baptized them, officiated at the funeral and later spoke with them about the meaning of all that had transpired.**