

June 25, 2017
Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 7, Year A, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

A good friend of mine, a man around my age, works a nurse practitioner in a hospital neonatal intensive care unit. He's been doing that work for over twenty-five years. He says he only likes working with small babies—that when they get larger than a handful, he's ready to pass them on. Admittedly, he's a big man with large hands. Still, the idea of caring for babies smaller than even a large handful brings me up short. He once mentioned the difficulty of protecting the delicate skin of newborn preemies: the caregivers slather them with Aquaphor Ointment and seal them in Ziploc bags ... presumably with their heads sticking out. I'd never even heard of Aquaphor Ointment. But now, any time I see it in a pharmacy, I imagine a tiny Ziploc'd baby.

My friend and I are both Episcopalians who grew up Roman Catholic. In Roman Catholicism, baptism is said to be necessary to remove “the stain of original sin” inherited by every person. When we grew up, it was still widely believed that babies who died without baptism went neither to heaven nor hell, but to a place called *limbo*. Though it's not an official doctrine of the church, for centuries fear of limbo drove most Roman Catholic parents to have their newborns baptized as soon as possible. As a child, I had nightmares about limbo. It was a room just wide enough to for two rows of bassinets and an aisle down the middle. I would walk down that aisle or sometimes float above it, and the bassinets appeared to go on for infinity.

Roman Catholic lay people can perform baptisms in emergencies. Intellectually, my friend has left original sin and limbo behind with his Roman Catholicism. Nonetheless, if an infant in his care turns critical, he baptizes them. As a result, he has baptized more babies than I *ever* will. I have no concern about the salvation of unbaptized babies—or anyone else, for that matter. And yet, in his place, I would probably do the same. Maybe it's my Roman Catholic past. Maybe it's superstition. Maybe I'd rather be safe than sorry. Maybe it's all those things. But I wonder if it has as much to do with me as it does with the baby.

Last week I went online and randomly searched for ideas about baptism. I came across a cartoon in which a priest is standing at a baptismal font full of water. To his left are a couple holding a baby. What makes the image unique is that a curved swimming pool slide stretches from about twice the height of the font, to the edge of the font. The caption has the priest saying, “It makes baptisms a lot more *fun* for *everyone*.”¹ Swimming pool slide or not, baptisms usually *are* fun. Infant baptisms are about the baby, and not *just* about the baby. They're also about the rest of us. We understand baptism as the sacrament of Christian initiation. As the *Book of Common Prayer* put it, baptism “makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church.” *We* are tasked welcoming today's newly initiated Christian. New Christians are necessarily in relationship with old ones.

In a few minutes, without a slide of any kind, baby Oliver will receive the sacrament of baptism. Remember, “sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”² During his baptism, Oliver receives grace, and maybe we do, too. We certainly need it. Notice that Oliver won’t witness to that outward and visible sign—*we* will. *He* won’t affirm his place in the Body of Christ—*we* will. Most specifically, you will be asked, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in his life in Christ?” By joining in our collective “We will,” *you* accept the grace and miracle and privilege and responsibility that comes with having a place in Oliver’s life. Teacher, guide, friend, and more: every adult in this community occupies these roles for every child in this community. Occupy them with intention, and the children become teacher, guide, and friend to you.

Today’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the Romans talks about baptism. In his time, Paul’s readers would have been baptized as adults. The community of early Jesus-followers living in Rome would have included Jews, converts to Judaism, and Gentiles. But Paul is concerned not with their past, but with their present. His message to every one of them, and to every one of us, is the same, as summarized in this verse : “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”³

It’s not always easy to walk in that newness of life, no matter how old one is. Sometimes I feel like a fragile newborn, like I need to be slathered in Aquaphor Ointment and tightly Ziploc’d. Last week, several conversations with parishioners reminded me that each of you, too, sometimes feel that way. Every one of us is joyful and sorrowful, broken and healed, weak and strong, fearful and courageous, one who harms and one who is harmed. At this moment, whether you are slippery with Aquaphor Ointment or slipping ecstatically down a slide, God’s grace *is* at work in you. Even if it doesn’t always feel that way, you walk in newness of life. Even when you are uncertain, *you* are a member of the body of Christ; *you* embody Christ. Cultivate certainty in yourself, that you may share it with others.

In my study this week I also ran across a poem by an early church father named Symeon the New Theologian. Alive on either side of the year 1000, Symeon “was a Greek Orthodox abbot, theologian, and poet” ... whose writings “encouraged his monks to have a keen awareness of God’s presence within them.”⁴ The poem goes like this.

We awaken in Christ’s body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhood).

I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning.

Do my words seem blasphemous?—Then
open your heart to Him

and let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him,
we wake up inside Christ's body

where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
and He makes us, utterly, real,

and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed

and recognized as whole, as lovely, [pause]
and radiant in His light
we awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.⁵

Notes

¹ John McPherson, cartoon posted on CartoonStock.com, under “Baptism Cartoons and Comics,” and denoted Baptism cartoon 1 of 65, at <https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/b/baptism.asp> (accessed July 23, 2017).



"It makes baptisms a lot more fun
for everyone."

² *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 857.

³ Romans 6:4, NRSV.

⁴ From the explanatory note accompanying the poem, “We Awaken in Christ’s Body,” by Symeon the New Theologian, in *Imaging the Word: An Arts and Lectionary Resource*, vol. 2, Blair et al., eds. (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 226.

⁵ Symeon the New Theologian, “We Awaken in Christ’s Body,” trans. and adapted by Stephen Mitchell, in *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 38; referenced in *Imaging the Word*.