

The Promise Is for Us All

First UMC of Pocatello

June 26, 2022

Acts 2:37-42

After hearing Peter's sermon on that first Pentecost, many in the crowd were "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Time stood still as the news reverberated through them. Jesus of Nazareth – he had been sent into the world by God *for them*. Jesus had lived a life infused with the wonder-working power of perfect love *for them*. And when he had been killed – crucified – *by them*, God had raised up in the power of the resurrection – for them. Now, before their eyes, the living Christ was fulfilling his work, pouring out the promise of the Holy Spirit upon "all flesh."

The people were cut to the heart. They were pierced. The phrase indicates a kind of transformative sorrow – not guilt, not shame – but a recognition that what they been taken for "living" up to that point was really a floundering for breath along the banks of a pure, serene sea of divine love. They wanted to plunge in.

Can't you remember wanting to plunge in? Can't you remember when the message of Jesus' love cut you to the heart? Can't you recall being moved so deeply that you joined your voice to the voices of the Jerusalem crowd: "What should we do?"

Dating right back to the day of Pentecost, part of the answer to the that question – "What should we do?" – has always been: "be baptized" (2:38). Dive into the ocean of God's love. Rest freely, flow gently in the current of God's everlasting grace. Let the past, let sin, let the old nature with its anxieties and compulsions and aggressions be washed away. Be born anew into the promise, the sovereign order, the community of God.

In the oceans of our world there are many different kinds of currents. For example, there are vast rivers, like the Gulf Stream, *within* the oceans themselves, running warm or cold, clockwise or counterclockwise. There are rivers like these occurring at various depths of the sea, stacked one on top of the other, running in different directions, at different temperatures. There are currents colliding to make treacherous passages, impenetrable fog, colossal waves. There are currents of wind

running to and fro upon the surface of the waters, pushing the tides this way and that.

Life is this way. There are many forces, many voices, many competing claims that carry us along, that buffet us, that want to take us where they think we should go. Paul calls the grandest and most systemic of them the powers and principalities, the cosmic forces of evil; and there are also intimate voices, local voices, inner voices – that want to drag us under and hurtle us along their way.

In baptism, we are released from the power of these tugging, clashing, merciless currents. By joining Jesus in the power of his resurrection, by living in the promise of the Holy Spirit, it is as though we emerge from those previous confined spaces into a wide, open space – the eternal, changeless, luminous ocean. All pulling and pushing cease. We rest in the victory of God. Grace is the air we breathe. We are whole, we are held. Released from other energies, the energy of God, the grace of Jesus, courses through us.

We don't leave the world per se, but it is like all those other waters that had seemed so real to us beforehand, reveal themselves to be illusory, transient, fleeting. We are in the midst of them, like Moses and the Israelites walking through the Red Sea, like Noah in the ark, but they cannot touch us any longer. Just as the resurrected Jesus passed through walls and locked doors, just as the apostles' inspired preaching passed through the insulated currents of culture and language, so we, the baptized, pass in and out of the currents that carry others along helplessly. We are in God's Kingdom.

I like to remind folks that whenever we baptize someone, we do not use their last name. This is because we are baptized into the name of God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism severs us from all those other voices that get spoken over us from the time of our birth, all the expectations laid upon us, all the claims made on who we are and who we will become. Who gets to tell you what you are, who you are, what your life and your love are for? Family? Friends? Culture? Government? No, only God. You belong first and foremost to God. Everything else, everyone else is rinsed off in baptism. No one else's word, no one's version of the story – of your story – is truer than God's.

Yet the severing is not all. Baptism is also a *joining*. Once free to swim unencumbered in the ocean of God's love, we realize that there are others in here with us too. We never live in the promise alone, but always with everyone whom God has saved. Baptism frees us to embrace the world with the free and impartial

love of Christ, to offer his universal embrace. Baptism compels us to see and to care for the others who we now accompany in these waters. This is why the story says that three thousand persons “were added” to the apostles (2:41). They had become fishers of people. The family of God *grew*. They were given to each other – across the barriers even of language.

This morning, we are going to baptize Freya Evalynn Guyton. Someday, Freya will have an opportunity to decide for herself which religious tradition and practice of faith feels most at home, most authentic, to her. What we are doing here today, once for all, is marking her with a taste, a memory, of God’s eternal ocean of light. We are ensuring that the story Freya is raised in will have God at its beginning, God in its middle, and God at its end. We trust God’s intentions for her, we pledge to allow her and God to work things out in their own way and in their own time; we bless her to be carried by these waters to the places and the people that God sets before her to love.

And, in letting her go, we receive her – in a new way. We receive her as a bearer of the image of God, not the image of ourselves; we receive her as another life, another soul, among all the countless others, joining us as a one family here in the water. We promise to swim alongside her until the day she is sure of her own strength. We listen expectantly for the love language that she will learn to speak. We rejoice that she is a co-heir of the promise, that she draws her life from the same clear and perfect waters as we.

She will belong to God; and in God, she will be among us.

How amazing! – that the promise Peter preached, the promise of the anointing, empowering, embracing, and saving Holy Spirit – is *still* being poured out upon us. *Here*, in the high desert of a continent unknown to Peter! *Now*, two millenia after Peter preached his sermon. “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away,” Peter said. And just as we were, to the mind and imagination of Peter, so far away as to be inconceivable, so too, if we are faithful to the gift, our children, and those far away from us, will continue to live by the promise, and be drawn out of the tempest into the restful, healing waters of life.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.