

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. The season of Lent is all about purification before the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But where did this idea of purification come from and what does it have to do with Baptism?

In many parts of the Ancient Near East there was not a lot of water, and not all of the water was good fresh water. As a result people did not bathe as often as we do today. Most of the time people only bathed on special occasions. I know that sounds gross, but the same was true in this country up until around the start of the 20th century. Most people would bathe on Saturday night so they wouldn't stink up their good clothes on Sunday morning. Can y'all take a guess at what changed in the early 20th century to lead people to bathe more often? (pause) Do you know what changed? (pause) In door plumbing. We take it for granted, but not having to go outside in the cold to wash our hands or to clean dishes made a big difference in the way people live. People got sick less. The infant mortality rate went down, and by the 1940's there was a substantial growth in the U.S. population which has often been called... (pause) the Baby Boom. By a show of hands, how many Baby Boomers do we have in the room today?

The idea of getting cleaned up for a big occasion is not a new idea. If we look back through Scripture we can see several instances when God would not reveal God's self to the people until the people had ritually cleansed themselves first. Before God would appear to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai they were required to consecrate themselves. The Israelites were told to wash their clothes and to be ready for the coming of the Lord on the third day. Later the priests were to consecrate or purify themselves before going into the tent of meeting and they had to be especially clean before going into the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was kept.

By the time Jesus was born there was a practice of purification among those Gentiles who wanted to become Jewish and to follow the Lord God Almighty. The practice of being completely submerged in in water for purification was called, "tevilah," in the Hebrew and, "baptismos," in the Greek. They are the roots for the word we use today called Baptism. However, the ritual cleansing with water did not have the saving power of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist bears witness to this distinction when he says,

"I baptize with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandal I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11).

The distinction between water Baptism and Baptism in the Holy Spirit reminds me of a song by Mr. Mac McAnally called, "Down the Road." In the song there is a boy with a crush on the little girl down the road. Certainly the girl's parents have a couple of questions for the boy.

**"Momma wants to know am I washed in the blood or just in the water,
Daddy wants to know if I make enough to take his daughter
Down the road before he can let her go, down the road."**¹

Sisters and brothers I think now is a good time to ask. Are you washed in the blood or just in the water? The Apostle Peter writes,

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-HtH6HYIz0> (last viewed 2-15-18).

“Baptism which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1Peter 3:20).

In the United Methodist Church we believe Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. Before Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross Baptism was little more than a Saturday night bath before Sunday morning church. However, through Jesus’ death and resurrection we are given the gift of God’s Justifying grace. Justifying grace washes away all of our past mistakes; all of our past sins, all of those selfish, rebellious acts which put distance between us and the love of God. Jesus is the great bridge builder. Jesus bridges the gap across our sin to connect us with God. Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners.

God acted first through Jesus Christ. That proves God’s love toward us. When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we become children in the family of God.

Now, just because we have been washed clean of our past sins it does not mean it is okay to become the outlaws in God’s family. Our past mistakes may be washed away, but God has something for us right here and right now. Baptism is the beginning of the journey – not the end. We have been given grace inwardly that we may be saved. How will we live into that grace outwardly? How will we live out God’s grace?”

The Marks of the New Birth in Jesus Christ are peace, joy, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. We are to love God by more than lip service. We are to live out our love for God by loving our neighbors as ourselves. That means loving those we know, and loving those we don’t. That means loving those we agree with, and loving those who get on our nerves. It is the love of God which gives us hope for a better tomorrow in the face of another school shooting. It is God’s love which gives us joy and peace as we face the uncertainty of American culture today. However, God’s peace, hope, and love are not meant to stay inside of these walls. God’s love is meant to extend out to those who need to feel it most outside of these walls.

The season of Lent is a time during our Christian calendar for putting the love of God first in our lives again. Instead of debating what will we give up this year please take some time to consider who we will love. Who will we give hope? With whom will we share God’s peace? Sisters and brothers, who will we love, and how will we show them?

In the Name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.