

“Death to Life”

*“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:2).*

In so many ways, Baptism stands at the center of our theology. According to Jesus’ words in Matthew 28, Baptism is one of the ways disciples are made (28:19). In Peter’s Pentecost sermon he proclaimed that Baptism bestows the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). In the last chapter of Mark, Jesus taught that Baptism is a means through which salvation is offered to mankind (16:16). In Galatians, Paul tells us that in Baptism we are “clothed” with Christ (3:27), and in the book of Titus we hear that in Baptism God works through the Holy Spirit to bring about rebirth and renewal (3:5). To put it simply, through the Word of God connected to the water of Holy Baptism, the Spirit delivers everything that Jesus died to give us and also creates the faith to receive these gifts. Without question, the doctrine of Holy Baptism is one of the most vital and critical teachings of the Christian faith. But there’s another aspect to the Bible’s teaching about Baptism that is absolutely essential for us to understand...and it is all about death. In fact, Paul’s words in Romans 6 tell us that Baptism is *first and foremost* a death, and that only when we understand the death that occurs in our Baptism, can we fully live as God’s people.

In the first verse of our epistle reading, Paul addresses an issue that he actually introduced in the previous chapter when he wrote: “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (5:20). It’s an odd statement in which Paul essentially says we can’t “out-sin” God’s grace. It is a word of assurance proclaiming that there is no sin that God’s forgiving love can’t cover. It is meant to put our hearts at rest and calm our guilty consciences, and yet Paul also knew that some would take his words the wrong way. He knew all about the sinful inclinations of the human heart, and he knew that in hearing these words of the pure, extravagant grace of God – grace which increases and is sufficient to forgive even the most heinous and unthinkable sins – there would be those who would see God’s amazing grace as a license to sin. He knew that there would be those who would greet grace not with humble thanksgiving and joyful response, but with the idea that since God’s forgiveness is so abundantly and freely given, then anything goes.

And to this twisted and damning logic Paul says in the first verse of our reading, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Romans 6:1). Paul’s words here are forceful and emphatic. And, as Paul explains why this thinking is so foolish, he does it in the language of death. “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3). In this rhetorical question Paul makes an important connection for us and it’s a connection that doesn’t come naturally to us so please listen closely: *In God’s dealing with us, death always comes first!* In fact, that’s what Baptism is all about!

It’s hard for us to wrap our minds around this concept. So often, we think of Baptism only in terms of our adoption into God’s family, and especially for us Lutherans where Baptism is usually connected with a baby being brought to the font, the thought or mention of death just doesn’t seem to fit and might even sound distasteful. And yet, that is exactly where Paul goes. In fact, that is where Paul *must* go because Baptism is more than a simple sentimental ceremony in front of the church, and it’s more than a public confession of faith or a vow of faithfulness. First and foremost, Baptism is a death! It is the means by which God connects us to the Cross of Jesus Christ and in Holy Baptism His death becomes ours. That’s what Paul means when he writes in verses six and seven, “We know that our old self was crucified with him

in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.”

In Baptism, God joins us to the Cross of Jesus where the punishment for our sin was delivered, where our guilt was removed, and where our sin died. And this death to sin changes us! Listen again to what Paul says, “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” These words tell us that, in Baptism, the believer dies with Christ and comes out on the other side *a new person*. Commenting on this truth, one scholar writes that, “in a spiritual sense (the believer) passes through a death, dies to sin, is really, totally, dead to sin. But this dying and being buried with Christ has the purpose...that we also should walk in newness of life...and in this new life we are supposed to walk, to have our conversation, and to show it in all the acts of our daily life. *The salvation of which we become partakers in Baptism...*” makes us holy.

If you’re like me, this talk about the new, sanctified life of the Baptized believer can be a little confusing because so often our lives don’t feel any different from those around us and they don’t always look very holy. In fact, more often than not we find ourselves falling back into the same old sins that have always caused us problems. Paul addressed this very real problem in Galatians where he wrote, “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:17).

The truth is that death to sin is an epic and lifelong struggle against the flesh that clings to our bones and against the inherited sin of Adam and Eve that still hides in our hearts...and this is why Baptism is so important in every single day of our lives. Even though the act of Baptism is a one-time occurrence in the life of the Christian, it is also an ongoing reality to which we must return each and every day. What does this mean? In the words of Luther, it means that in our new life as believers our sinful nature must be, “drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death...” and that, “the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous.” So, as long as we live on this earth, we must deal with the “our sinful nature” and we can do that only through the connection to Christ’s death that comes in true repentance. God promises new life, but that life can only come through death, and that death is never something that we would naturally choose. Confronting and confessing our sin is uncomfortable. Honesty is painful and it is something our sinful nature will always fight. But in confession and heartfelt repentance our sins are taken back to the Cross, they are turned over to our Substitute, they are crucified with Christ, and in exchange we are given the power to live a new life! In other words, through the confession of sin and the forgiveness of God that always follows, we move from death to life.

In your Baptism, God set a pattern for your life as a Christian, first *by faith* as you repent and daily die to sin, and ultimately *by sight* as your sin-sick body will go to the grave only to be raised again in glory. In the waters of your Baptism, you have a new life. You have been connected to the Cross and united with Him in His death, and by His word given to you in your Baptism, God has promised that you will rise again.

My friends, each day you can die to sin believing that God will see you through your struggle! This means that you can face your fear and be honest about your failings, and you can tell the truth about your flaws and you can confess your sins to God and to each other confident in His promise that, “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:5). Go with the peace of this Baptismal promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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