

What a blessing for us this day to have witnessed the baptisms of Dennis and little Blythe! Is anything sweeter than bringing people into the fellowship of the Body of Christ? Baptism is so very full of symbolism and meaning. It also confers grace upon us – it is a sacrament. Because of this and because of the centrality of baptism in the life of a Christian, I would like to begin this morning by reviewing in a cursory way some of the basics of the baptismal sacrament. Then I will briefly touch upon the readings for this Sunday for they do have implications for baptism and for all of us who are baptized. So let's dive in.

So what is baptism? The one sentence answer from Louis Tarsitano's *An Outline of an Anglican Life* reads thus, "Holy Baptism is the dominical sacrament, commanded by Jesus Christ, required of all human beings for salvation, that makes us members of Christ's Body (the Church) and heirs of eternal life." Now let's unpack that a bit.

So baptism is a sacrament. And what is a sacrament? An outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words, a sacrament is something in this physical world that imparts a spiritual benefit to us. Additionally we stated that baptism was a dominical sacrament or a sacrament of our Lord Jesus. Jesus commanded every Christian to partake of these sacraments. Earlier we read Matthew 28 where Christ's command that we be baptized is recorded for us:

Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

Some other points that we should note about the sacraments. Beginning first with the fact that they are only found in the Church. You cannot go to city hall to have Christian baptism. Also, one cannot baptize himself. The sacrament must be administered by another person. In other words, baptism is completely a gift of God, freely given to any who would come to the Church to receive it. We must avail ourselves to receive the gift, but the gift of baptism, of grace, of salvation is all of God. It is entirely the work of God.

As mentioned before, there are two parts to a sacrament. In baptism the outward sign is water which carries with it many associations. We use water for washing and purifying. We must consume it for life. And likewise, it can be chaotic, destructive, and life-taking. All of these meanings come together for us in baptism for it is a sign of the destruction of our

natural, fallen life, and it is the genesis of the new life.

The minister in baptism is generally the bishop or a priest, but it can be administered by a deacon if a priest is not available, or even by a layman in emergency situations. The liturgical form is from our prayer book, but the essential element is that baptism be done in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, as specified by Jesus at the end of Matthew 28. The last element required for a baptism is that the intention of the minister and the baptized person must be genuine. The minister's intention is obvious by his participation in the rite, and the baptismal candidate's intention is given in the examination within the rite. We take the actions of each to suffice as a measure of intention.

As a sacrament, the physical matter of water is accompanied by spiritual grace. Water represents a cleansing and a dying, so in baptism are we cleansed from sin, and indeed we spiritually die unto sin. Baptism is a repentance that is certified by God so not only are we purged from sin and our sinful nature, we are born again with a new spiritual nature. We are reborn into the family of God as a righteous children of God. This means that the Holy Spirit is gifted to us and enlivens our hearts and renews our minds. This is what we call regeneration which is the beginning of spiritual life. This term may cause some consternation with Christians of other traditions who understand regeneration to only be evidenced by persisting obedience. But in the older sense of the word, regeneration is the enlivening of the heart that must be nurtured into spiritual maturity. We link regeneration with baptism because the scriptures do so in Titus 3:5 and 6:

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour....

Notice also in this verse, that St. Paul connects the washing of regeneration with the renewal of the Holy Ghost. So in baptism, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit who takes up residence in the soul of the believer and dwells there as a testimony of the renewed life and as an aid to living a godly life. We are therefore sealed with the Spirit, and thus in the Spirit we are also grafted into the corporate body of Christ in this world, the Church. Our baptism is our membership into the church.

We have all of these blessings in baptism. It is very literally the beginning of a new life for our old lives under the covenant of the fallen humanity of Adam are cut off and our new covenantal life in Christ is birthed, or is "cut" as the term has been used since ancient times. In baptism, a man's very being, his identity, is changed. He is no longer the person he

previously was. Of course we think of marriage when we use covenantal language, for marriage is indeed the covenant where a man and a wife are joined together into a unique and new union. Their new identity is evidenced by a name change, and this is why a person is named in baptism as well. Baptism can therefore be described as being married to God. In this sacrament, God freely gives himself to us, and we respond to His love by giving ourselves to Him. Baptism unites us to the divine.

Covenants are generally ratified by sacrifices, by the shedding of blood, and God Himself gave Himself to be our covenantal sacrifice. The water and blood that issued forth from His side is symbolized in the purifying waters of baptism. And just as Eve was drawn from Adam's side, so too the Church, the Bride of Christ, is drawn from Christ's side. Baptism joins us in these holy mysteries.

Not only does Christ's sacrifice for us constitute us into the Church, so too His sacrifice strengthens us to live faithfully as members of the new covenant. As with all covenants, there are ethical requirements to being a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. We are become a royal priesthood and therefore we represent Christ to the world and must live like Christ. The Eucharist, Holy Communion, is the sacrament which constantly assures us that we are loved by God and that we are one with Him even though He is not physically with us in this world. Christ in the Eucharist is the ongoing ratification of Christ which we received in our baptismal covenant.

Turning briefly to our lessons today: the reading from St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians contrasts the Old Covenant made with the Jewish people with the New Covenant made with all who would receive Jesus Christ. The signs of the old covenant were circumcision and passover, which functioned in much the same way as baptism and the Eucharist function for us. In the early Church, many people were advocating that to become a Christian, one first had to become a Jew. In other words, men would have to be circumcised. No doubt this was a huge barrier to entry. Those advocating for such practice were more concerned with making Christianity some sort of exclusive club than recognizing it as God's plan of salvation for all of humanity. Circumcision was a point of pride for them even though Paul argues repeatedly that the Law could not save. Salvation is the free gift of God, not a result of works lest any man should boast. The Law brought us to repentance and revealed Christ to us, but the fulfillment of the Old Covenant Law for us was all of Jesus Christ, The Messiah. As saint Paul states, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ Jesus neither

circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." And indeed in our baptisms we have become new creatures, no longer enslaved to sin, but now alive in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The challenge for each of us, therefore, is to live this reality daily. Baptism is not magic. It is the beginning of a life with Christ. God gives us what we need to live righteously, but He doesn't make us obey. He doesn't compel His children to do good. He gives us the opportunity to do good and right, but we must accept that opportunity. If we choose to turn from God, be assured that we can weaken the new life that has been given to us. If we neglect fellowship, corporate worship, Bible study, and prayer, our spiritual lives will suffer.

The Gospel lesson lays this choice before us: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Mammon is a strange word to us, but it is a term for wealth that appears in many ancient languages. It was even personified fairly early in the Christian era as the demon of greed or avarice, and so to worship mammon was interpreted literally as idolatry, as worshiping the god of wealth instead of the One True God.

The point here is that we who are baptized must not allow our ultimate trust to be given to money or to the hidden and subtle demonic spirits behind it. Our faith, evidenced and established in our baptisms, has freed us from such things. To this end, we must be single minded, focused upon serving God above all others.

Now does this passage from the Sermon on the Mount mean that we don't have to work? No, of course not. We should seek to be productive in this world, both culturally and economically. Work is a part of human dignity – we image God in participating in society through diligent and honest industry. This passage does not excuse us from labor.

The key here is that we are challenged to give our primary allegiance and loyalty to God knowing that He will take care of us. In this world it is so easy for us to be dogged by fears – the what ifs. What if the economy fails, what if I get fired, what if I cannot buy what I need, what if ... what if ... what if? We think that money will save us in the day of trouble. Let me be as clear as I can be. Money will not, cannot save you in any sense. Only God can save. And God will save you. He might even save you as you expect to be saved, but regardless, He will save you toward the preservation and the building up of His Kingdom. There surely will be times of distress, but only God is our sure foundation. Every thing else fails. Place your hope in God. Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these

things shall be added unto you.” Do not be anxious – trust in God and give Him priority in your life. Live into your baptism.

Today it has been both a joy and a privilege for us to have witnessed the baptisms of Dennis and Blythe as God has grafted them into His Kingdom, the Church. It is a reminder, and therefore a renewal, of our own baptisms and the vows which we made or were made on our behalf. Thank you, God, for this incredible gift. May we, like St. Paul, only boast in the fact that we have been saved by the cross of Christ, and may we honor that gift in our lives, that the life of Christ given us by the Spirit dwelling within us may become incarnate in us.

Let us pray.

Holy Father, as we have been made your children in baptism, we pray that we would evermore live into that grace. Reorder our affections so that we would always seek first your Kingdom. Turn us from exalting ourselves, but rather may we exalt only in You, worshiping you both as your gathered people and in our lives apart.

We pray this to you, O Father, in the Name of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.