

There is something about feeling clean that we all share in our human experience. I remember when I would work a 24-hour shift as a chaplain in UNC Hospital. All I wanted to do when I got home was to take a shower. Those days were full of me bearing witness to the suffering of many people of all ages. So, at the end of those shifts taking a shower would help me remember everything that I had experienced, honor the lives of those who died, and allowed me to wash away the day and to move forward.

There is something beautifully symbolic about water. All throughout time God has used water to show God’s saving action in our lives. It was through water that God guided Moses to safety, it was through water that God parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could be free. It was through water that burst through rocks in the wilderness that the Israelites survived. It was through the water of a womb that Jesus was nurtured and through water that Christ was baptized.

It is through water today that we can remember our baptisms and be thankful for all the ways that God continues to cleanse us of our sins and give us life. Water by itself is symbolic, but with the Holy Spirit it becomes a sacrament and “means of God’s grace” in our lives.¹

We all desire to feel clean spiritually. This was David’s prayer in Psalm 51 as he asked God to “Create in me a clean heart” and “renew a right and fresh spirit within me.” We hear these same sentiments in Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

I will never forget a youth group I led one evening. We were talking about Lent and how God called us to lay down our burdens. So, I asked the youth to write the things they really wanted to let go of on this special paper. They wrote with magic markers. When was time to symbolically lay their sins before Christ they brought up their pieces of paper to this huge bowl of water.

For a moment, their sins and mine clung to the pieces of paper, but when the bowl was stirred the sins jumped off the pieces of paper into the bowl and created a vibrant red with the pieces of paper remaining white.

For them and for myself this moment was powerful because it showed that God continues to cleanse us through the blood of Christ. It is tradition for us Methodist to remember our baptism each year at the beginning of the year.

We do this for many reasons. One: What a great way to start the year, by reminding ourselves that we have been claimed by God to do God’s work this year. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit is still with us. Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus Christ upon his baptism, the Holy Spirit is still with us to lead us and guide us, even during these uncertain times.

When we remember our baptism and are thankful, we are embodying what it means to be the people of God. In baptism God makes a covenant with us and we make a covenant with God. God cleanses us of our sins, and we commit to do our best to grow in the grace and knowledge of God. We commit to care for those who are baptized in our presence and help them grow up to know God.

Through the sacrament of Baptism, we see God’s divine grace enacted in our lives. Baptism is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why we baptize children in The United Methodist Church. We believe this is God’s prevenient grace in our lives. That even before we can voice our faith in God, that the Holy Spirit is drawing us to God in a relationship.

We know that we serve a relational God and that Jesus said: “Let the little children come to me.” We also see there are instances of whole families being baptized in Scripture like the jailer in Acts 16:33. When children are baptized, they are claimed by God and their parents take on the responsibility to raise them in faith. Then when they are ready, they confirm this faith for themselves and are justified before God.

Most of us find ourselves in the sanctifying state of our baptismal vow. We have confessed our sins to God, and this is something we continue to do throughout the course of our lives. We live into sanctifying grace when we continue to grow in our love and knowledge of God, when we live out the baptismal vows we took to: “resist, evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”²

I wonder how are you living out your baptism today? How do you need to be cleansed anew?

It is a new year, and we are all called to let go of the things have been holding back so that we can wholeheartedly serve God with our lives.

The joy of being a pastor is to be present when people are baptized. Whether they are infants, or those in their 90’s each baptism is equally special. Baptism is special because it always happens in community.

One of my favorite stories of baptism happened in Acts shows where God uses a faithful man named Ananias to lead Paul to a safe place as he found himself blind after he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Ananias did not leave his side and supported Paul as he professed his faith and was baptized. It was after his baptism that Paul started his ministry for Christ.

In the moment of Jesus’ baptism, we see the Holy Trinity at work. God the Father spoke, God the Son obeyed, and God the Holy Spirit blessed this encounter. On this day we remember our baptism and are thankful that God called us to be in relationship. Perhaps you have not yet been baptized and you are ready to move forward in this sacrament.

In Baptism we witness God’s saving action upon all our lives. In Genesis 1 we see that from the beginning of time, the Holy Spirit was hovering over the water. This same Holy Spirit is hovering over our lives today. How do you feel connected to this third person in the Trinity? In a whisper or the wind, through watching a candle burn like the flames of Pentecost? The Holy Spirit continues to beckon to us to respond to God’s leading in our lives.

I wonder how the Holy Spirit may be beckoning to you during this season in our lives. God is still working even during this pandemic. God is still calling us to serve. God is still creating and offering us new life. All we have to do is receive it.

The good news for our lives is that God’s means of grace are always available for us to receive.

Today I invite you to take the water you have in front of you and the towel that you have beside you.

Touch the water, even take a moment to play in the water. God’s Holy Spirit like this water renews us, refreshes us, and cleanses us. As you touch this water today know that through confession and repentance, you also have been cleaned of your sin.

As you touch the water, empty yourself of anything holding you back from answering God’s calling upon your life. Maybe it is fear, or uncertainty, maybe you are worried how you will do something new and still hold up all the responsibilities that you have to do. Maybe you can’t name what has been holding you back.

- Wash your hands of these fears.
- Wash your hands of pride.
- Wash your hands of the need to be perfect.
- Wash your hands of regret.
- Wash your hands and know that God cleanses us from all our sins through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Take a deep breath in and breathe in and out the breath of the Holy Spirit. Think of all the ways that God’s wind is blowing through the world today reforming and refreshing old things and making them new. Feel connected to how the Holy Spirit is blowing through your life.

Pray: God we ask you to bless this water today and all who receive it as we all remember your saving action on our lives today. Amen.

Now take the water and make the form of a cross on your head or forehead. Today remember that you are claimed. You have just outlined the very same cross that was made on your head at your baptism. This cross remains upon us as an invisible symbol that we have been marked for glory and not despair. In moments of hardship retrace this cross and remember who you are and whom you belong to.

Offer your hands to God. Raise them as a holy offering to God. God take these hands and bless them that they may be used for your glory. That they may be used to comfort and teach, to encourage and preach your embodied word.

Now dry your hands with the towel as a reminder to be gentle with yourself and care for yourself so that you can care for others.

May you not be a stranger to God’s saving action of water in your life. Whether you think about God each time you wash your hands or shower, or whether it is encountering God’s power through a waterfall, never fail to take a moment and give thanks to God for the gift of water and life.

So today, remember your baptism and be thankful church. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Gayle Carlton Felton. “By Water and the Spirit.”

² United Methodist Hymnal. Service of the Baptismal Covenant.