

# Sermon Text for August 12, 2018

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Genesis 17:9-14, Acts 2:37-42

**“Keeping the covenant”**

In every new members class I let the people know that the Presbyterian Church as a whole gathers more people from different denominations than any other. I like to do this periodically just to get a feel for the landscape. How many of you grew up in a church that was Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic etc. This is one of the reasons why I love the Presbyterian Church in general, and First Presbyterian specifically. Welcome to a large diverse family. We don't ask people to keep check their theology at the door, but we do tend to become less dogmatic over time as we worship together. I think that is a good thing.

What tends to happen in our Sunday settings is that we try to avoid some of the hot theological issues where there are real differences such as baptism, or the Lord's Supper for example. We end up focusing on that which unites us like Sunday School, evangelism, social outreach. I mean who can argue and object to those activities? John Stott said: In fundamentals, unity, in non-fundamentals, liberty, in all things love. You may have heard it said: in the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty. For the most part we tend to be able to do that around here.

Today, just to mix it up, actually because our Scripture requires it, and we because we have living breathing proof that these things matter, we are going to talk about baptism. It is a fundamental for all churches. Every Christian Church on the face of this planet baptizes in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How and when it is administered, well, that is where we find the liberty. But what we can all agree upon is that in baptism we find an entrance into the Christian community which we call the church which is Jesus' chosen family.

Our Scripture today talks about this covenant community and baptism as a sign and a seal for that person in the community and today in Acts we find what are the markers of a Christian community that has been washed in baptism.

**READ**

I enjoy working our way through Acts because every Sunday it is like coming back to an old friend. I also hope that it brings our knowledge of Scripture to a different level. We jumped ahead in our reading simply because today we are going to have four baptisms and Scripture requires that we talk about baptism today. Well, just in case you've missed it, we find ourselves with the disciples in a large room with Jewish pilgrims from all over the world on the day of Pentecost. A very scary and awe inspiring scene has just taken place complete with a loud wind, fire, and uneducated Galilean fishermen speaking in foreign languages about the love of Almighty God for all people.

Well, someone has to step up and explain exactly what has taken place and as you would expect that someone is Peter. Peter who stepped into the vacuum last week created with the ascension of Jesus, so he is the de facto leader of the disciples. If you look at the verses in Acts 2 before our Scripture today you will find the first recorded sermon on record. Peter begins by explaining what just happened in light of the prophet Joel. Remember, in this room are devout Jews so they knew that Joel was a prophet who spoke about the times before the Messiah, the anointed one of God would come. They knew what it meant to be a part of an eternal covenant created by God, and it is that covenant over the ages to which Peter refers.

He then speaks about David as one chosen by God but even he spoke about someone greater, one who would be God's own son. Then he ends this by saying, and Jesus was that person. The very same whom you crucified. We know that it was an effective, moving and powerful sermon because the people went from mocking and saying that the disciples were drunk at such an early hour to asking the question: "What should we do?" In the Greek the sense is much more of a continuation from what has just been said so it really should read: "Now then, what should we do?" Basically after all that you have said, which we now know is true, what should we do? How do we become children of this new covenant? We are now outsiders looking in, we want in.

Peter gives the answer in verse 38 and I would agree that here the path to salvation and how we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is laid out. Peter says: repent, be baptized, your sin will be forgiven, and you will receive the Holy Spirit. If in your life you have never repented of your sin before Almighty God you have no place in God's covenant. That was true then and it is true now. As Protestants we miss

out on something that is very, very important. That is confession. Now don't get me wrong of course there is no mediator between us and God, but if we could somehow institute a time of confession where we are somehow disciplined to name our sins and to realize that we have to repent of those sins, that would be a healthy thing. Without all of the liturgical or sacramental strings attached.

If you have not been baptized then you are not a child of the covenant. Peter is very clear here. Now, here he says in the name of Jesus Christ and that is to keep in line with the covenant theme that he evoked earlier, but Matthew in his Great Commission uses the formula churches employ around the world today and that is to go out into the world and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If you have not been baptized you have no part in the covenant community.

For without the forgiveness of your sins by the grace of God through your repentance there is still a distance between you and God that is as far as the east is from the west and there are no actions or good deeds that you can perform to close that gap. Only repentance and God's grace is able to do that. Now let me be clear, there are a number of ways in which to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but they all involve repentance.

I call them Peter and Paul experiences:

But baptism is seen as an essential and fundamental experience to our initiation and welcome into the Christian community, it is the visible sign of God's invisible grace. All churches can agree to that. Let's look at the Old Covenant to see how baptism has taken the place of the visible sign from then. It was our Genesis Scripture. What was the sign of the Old Covenant? Circumcision, that's right. Abraham is commanded by God to have all the males in his family circumcised which was his responsibility in fulfilling this agreement between his family and God which stretched to those following in his lineage. That's why the birth of Isaac was so important, to keep this covenant going.

If the sign of the Old Covenant was circumcision then who can be a part of this covenant? Only males and only those within the family of Abraham. Very limiting and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century where we find ourselves in Acts, you see in that room gathered are people who had kept the Abrahamic covenant and so felt some entitlement to the

promises in it. That is until Peter convicted them, they thought they were in covenant with God.

The new covenant is marked by water in baptism. That is the sign and the symbol that this person was part of the covenant of God. This new covenant is able to be given to whom? All people, look at vs. 39: For you, your children, for all those who are far away. Brothers and sisters, we are far, far away. The covenant is for us for God has called us to him.

Now in this highly populated Anabaptist region we disagree theologically between believers baptism and infant baptism, but somehow for the past 185 years we've been able to work that out. We disagree between sprinkling, dunking and my favorite sprunking. But somehow love has been able to reign.

But where the fundamentals of our theology unite is in the fact that we do agree that baptism creates a covenant, a new covenant community in which we now find ourselves. That is the fundamental truth that Peter tells his listeners and that fundamental truth I pass on to you.

I could stop right here with the sermon. But I have a captive audience and you need to know that there is more to living a life as a Christian rather than just being baptized or rather than just saying that you love Jesus. Let me just pull up verse 42 as we see what happens once they are baptized, 3,000 of them that one day. Their enthusiasm doesn't die, but they become a part of a living and breathing community. Here are 4 things that mark a covenant community and let's see how we do to this measuring stick.

1) Apostles' teaching: It isn't every church that has 5 adult Sunday School classes. We do pretty well here, but not every single person in this community is plugged in yet to one of these studies and that is our goal, that every person here be involved in a study so that you can grow in your faith.

2) Fellowship: This may be one area that we lag a little behind. We do enjoy our fellowship hour, but it remains very clique. We love our yearly church picnic, but what has happened to the periodic ham loaf gatherings that we would have after church? I'll never forget after I preached here in May and you voted me in, we had ham loaf. It was instrumental in me coming here. If they like ham loaf, I want to be a part of the people.

People always ask me what brought you to First Presbyterian, and I say ham loaf. We can do better.

3) Breaking of Bread: We do that in communion on a monthly basis, but I think this also implies eating together. That is where Jesus does some of his best teaching in Scripture. Now, don't get me wrong, there are group within this church that do this, which is great, but I would put this in the league of fellowship and see if we could combine the two on a quarterly basis. How can we break bread together in each other's houses? How many of us has had a meal in the house the person with whom we sit in the same pew every Sunday? Try that out.

4) Prayer: I am so thankful for our time of prayer that we have going on every Wednesday morning. We doubled our attendance this past week, which was great. Come and join us every Wednesday morning at 7.

Brothers and sisters, you are the new covenant community. Live in the light of God's grace and love.

Amen.