

Sermon Text for October 6, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 18:1-8, Acts 16:25-34

“Why do we baptized adults and babies?”

In the past this has been one of my favorite Sundays of the year. World Communion Sunday is a time when we stop and recognize that all over the world people not at all like us, and people like us as well, are gathering around this table to celebrate the new life we have in Jesus. World Communion Sunday in the past in congregations where I have served people have made bread from whatever heritage they claim. I have linked the congregation where I have served virtually with others overseas and been brought to this table by pastors in other countries as we celebrate the feast together.

As we live and serve together in this context it can be easy for some of us to think that all Christians look and think like us. No, actually we are in the minority in how we worship and how we look and Jesus loves those in his body the same. So, welcome to World Communion Sunday today as we celebrate as we do knowing that many others are celebrating as we do.

We actually may be a bit more diverse than we look. We come from many different denominational backgrounds. How many of you grew up Presbyterian. How about Methodist. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Baptist. Some of you raised your hand four times. What we find before us today is this sacrament of communion that for many of us historically may have separated us more than brought us together.

Today is going to be a little more of a theological exercise where you hopefully will learn something which may not have a whole lot of practical value. Sometimes you learn something here on Sunday that has practical value, but very little theological implications. Both of our Scriptures today point to this topic of what unifies us, but the one we will read now will refocus us on baptism. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURES

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This picture is incredibly present in churches throughout the world that have artwork in the churches. Every single Orthodox Church will have some depiction of this. It is the story of Abraham hosting the three strangers which has been interpreted by Christian art as Abraham hosting God in the three persons. It is interpreted as it being the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So if you ever see this you will know it represents the Trinity.

But the story is one that is important for us today as Abraham welcomes guests to his home, strangers, and then serves them a meal. I love how he tells Sarah in detail what to do as if he had just watched a Tastee video and had come up with the idea of baking bread all on his own. He sticks around as they eat just to ensure their complete satisfaction with his hospitality. He did not know that he was serving God. Let's read Hebrews 13:1-2 and we see an allusion to the importance of this. What we do around the table, to whom we offer it is sacred. Offering hospitality to a stranger around a table is a sacred act.

Acts 16 takes us to another sacred act. Let's set the background again. Paul and Silas are in the important city of Philippi where they are meeting down by the river to pray with Lydia and the rest of the Jewish community. In the verses before today and ones which we did not cover, one day on their way to the river they see a girl who was possessed by a demon and was really, really bothering them. Paul casts out the demons really just to give them relief but this demon had been profitable to the owners of the slave.

The owners rile up the business people, have Paul and Silas arrested, beat them with iron rods and flog them, and throw them into prison. We pick up with them in prison at midnight singing songs, praying with all of the prisoners paying attention to them. Actually, just like Lydia, it states that they were listening to them.

An earthquake comes which broke the foundation of the prison. The doors of the cells swing open, the chains of the prisoners come off, the Roman jailer wakes up and sees the open doors and realizes he will be killed because all of his prisoners escaped while he was asleep on the job. He takes out his sword and Paul yells to him to stop.

The jailer is so overcome that he asks the question: what must I do to be saved? Believe in Jesus, comes the answer, and you and your household will be saved. He cleans their wounds, is baptized, and serves them a meal in his own home. The jailer recognizes the prayers and the songs of Paul and Silas represented a truth which he wanted to make as his own. He realizes that even though they were the ones in chains, they were the ones who were truly free because of Jesus.

What must I do to be saved? That is a question we have asked and we have answered. It led to the baptism of the jailer. I have had experiences in church where I have approached a parent after a birth of a child and said: it won't be long before they we will be baptizing them. The parent then tells me that they are waiting to baptize their child until they are able to make their own decision if they want to be baptized or not.

We live in an area where Mennonites and Baptists and many non-denominational churches believe that you wait to baptize until a person is old enough to profess love for Jesus. Presbyterians believe that you baptize the babies and children of believers too, because it declares a more important love: Jesus' love for us..., the love that loved us before we even thought about loving Him.

In Acts 2:39 we read Peter responds to this same questions that the jailer asked: what must I do to be saved and he responds by saying: Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins..., the promise is for you and your children. In our chapter 16 we read about it happening twice, first time with Lydia and now the jailer.

In Colossians 2:9 Paul equates circumcision and baptism. Baptism, he says, now replaces circumcision as the sign that someone belongs to God's family. No 8 day old was asked if they wanted to be circumcised and I guarantee you no family waited until their child was old enough to decide if they wanted to be circumcised. So circumcision was the sign that and claim on the covenant promise that everyone belonged to God's family, including children.

Think about it this way. What if I asked the parent who was waiting what's your daughter's name and he replied Betty Lou and I said, oh, Betty Lou Jones and the dad responded: No, just Betty Lou. We are not giving her our last name yet. We are going to wait until she is old enough to decide for herself whether she wants to be a member of our family. And we want her to remember her naming ceremony. That would never happen. He gave that little girl his name the moment she was born because she belonged to that family, whether she knew it or not.

We baptize babies because, as the Bible teaches, we want to claim them for the family of God to affirm the promise of God that he or she should be called a child of God by marking them with God's commanded seal of baptism.

Do they still need to make a decision later on? Of course they do. That's why we have confirmation, to confirm for themselves what their parents proclaimed on their behalf. That is the service they get to remember.

But on that day when we baptize her into the family as a baby, we will be there and we will remember and we will tell her for the next 13 years: "We remember the day you were baptized and we gave you the name of Jesus' child. You belong to His family.