

“The clothes of Christ”

Galatians 3:23-29,

Roman 6:3, 5,

Colossians 2:12,

Colossians 3:12-17

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Brentwood First Presbyterian

Mike Magee

Introduction

Before performing baptism for a child, the pastor approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?" "I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests." "I don't mean that," the pastor responded. "I mean, are you prepared spiritually?" "Oh, sure," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."

I know of a child, age 4, who was asked on the occasion of his 5th birthday what kind of party he wanted to have. He said, "I want everybody to be a king and queen." So, he and his mother went to work, making silver crowns out of cardboard and aluminum foil, purple robes out of crepe paper, and royal scepters out of sticks painted gold. On the day of the party, as the guests arrived, they were each given a royal crown, a robe, and a scepter, and were dressed as a king or a queen. It was a royal site - all kings and queens. Everyone had a wonderful time. They ate ice cream and cake, they had a procession up to the top of the block and back again, and then when it was all over, everyone knew it had been a royal, wonderful day. That evening as the little boy's mom tucked him into bed, she asked him what he wished for when he blew the candles out on the birthday cake. "I wished," he said, "that everyone, everyone in the whole wide world could be a king and a queen. Not just on my birthday, but everyday." Well, baptism shows that something very much like that happened one day at a place called Calvary. We who were nobodies became somebodies. Those who were no people became God's people. The wretched of the earth became royalty. What an image for baptism. All churches agree that baptism marks the entry into or the identity of a person with the body of Christ. In baptism, we are crowned as the people of God.

The sacrament of baptism is something which happens to the individual but is done by the church on behalf of God's Spirit. In Baptism, the pastor acts on behalf of the church for the cause of Jesus Christ. The church is not saying we are not children of God until we are baptized. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth did not make Elizabeth a queen. A coronation can only make someone a queen if that person is already royalty. The nation publicly proclaims in the coronation - this woman is royalty, put a crown on her head. Likewise, at baptism, the church

says publicly, this person is royalty, baptize her. This person is God's property, God's child, God's subject – baptize her.

So what do we say about Baptism? It is an outward and a visible sign of an inward and a spiritual grace. The church uses the symbol of physical washing as a sign of moral and spiritual cleansing. Baptism is symbolic of our passing from death to life through Jesus Christ. And Baptism is symbolic of our exchanging the clothes of our old life and putting on the clothes of Christ. It is the sacrament of the church that marks the reclaiming of our identity. The fact that we are named by God as his people, that we nobodies have become somebodies, that we no people have become God's people.

Before you dismiss symbols, let me tell you a couple of stories about symbols. The first story is when a family with three children were talking over supper about baptism. The parents were debating who was going to go that evening to a discussion about the meaning of infant baptism, because their newborn was being baptized. The 5 year old asked what was baptism, and the 3 year old dipped her thumb in her glass of water and got up from the table and walked over to her baby brother and made the sign of the cross on his forehead. You could have heard a pin drop. She could not articulate what baptism meant in theological words, but she got the symbolism.

Another story. A couple was grieving over their stillborn child. A chaplain friend of mind tells me the couple wanted their stillborn baby baptized right there at the hospital. Theologians would say baptizing a dead person is not necessary because they are already in God's hands. The chaplain realized having a theological discussion was not the pastoral thing to do. But no water faucet was in sight. So the chaplain dipped her handkerchief in the parent's tears, and made the sign of the cross on the stillborn's head with the wet handkerchief. Symbols mean a lot to us human beings.

Romans 6 and Colossians 2:12 both speak of baptism being a sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. "When you were buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

There is a door to Peter's Basilica in Rome that depicts a series of death scenes. There was death by falling, death in war, the martyred death of Peter upside down on the cross, and death by drowning. Death by water. Baptism – our enacted entrance into the church is by water. So death by water is an authentic understanding of baptism. The early church even built its baptismal fonts in the shape of tombs to make that graphic. Being buried with Jesus in baptism – having the sign and the seal of our salvation placed upon us with water.

So being buried with Christ is a metaphor for baptism.

And Galatians and Colossians both speak of baptism being a shedding of our old clothes and putting on the clothes of Christ.

Yes, baptism symbolizes our death to sin. But what are we born into? What are these new clothes of Christ?

Movement 1 God's Spirit moves us from shallow acquaintance to deep relationship

My most memorable birthday was my 11th birthday. Finally, I was old enough to join the Boy Scouts. When we went on campouts, we had these four walled tents that were tall enough in the center so an 11 year old could stand up in the center of them. There were 6 flaps, two in the front, two in the rear, and one on each side. When it was raining, and also at night to keep the mosquitoes out, we laced the flaps together. This also kept the wind out. Sometimes we also laced them shut if we wanted to take a snooze in the middle of the day. We could peek out through the lashings and not be seen. We could see out but those outside had a hard time seeing in. The tent was sort of like a one way mirror. So some of the scouts would hide in their tents to avoid work. The Boy Scouts could also hide from interaction with other people. The tent became a place into which one could withdraw. Our **FACES** are sometimes like that. One way mirrors through which we can peek out, but no one can peek in.

But some of the Boy Scouts, on days of sunshine, opened wide their tent flaps. Inviting the refreshing wind to blow through their tents, and inviting other scouts into their tents. Full transparency. No hiddenness among these Scouts.

AUTHENTIC FRIENDSHIPS are like this. Full transparency. No hiddenness among authentic friends.

All of you should go on a short term mission trip. The trips that our Presbytery and our church take to Guatemala help the Kekchi indigenous, yes. But the true beneficiaries are not the Kekchi. The true beneficiaries are the gringos. We learn what it is like to live in an underdeveloped country. We experience to a very small extent the hardships they live with every day. And we form relationships. Tighter relationships with each other, with the indigenous we serve, and with God. Because in Guatemala we have devotionals twice a day to get closer to God. Because we have deep conversations with the indigenous and develop long term relationships with them. And because we have long meaningful conversations among former strangers from Middle TN, and develop close relationships with them also.

We have enough of those "you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back" relationships in our lives. We have enough *quid pro quo* relationships. What we need is the joy and peace of more long-term, unconditional, and authentic relationships. With God and other people.

But you do not have to go on mission trips to Guatemala to develop authentic relationships. You can experience authentic relationships within this congregation. During Bible study on Sundays or Thursday afternoons. During our monthly potlucks. During our weekly dance classes. During our monthly jaunts to the Downtown Presbyterian soup kitchen. Even during work days at the church.

Because the peaceful and joyful fruit of God's Spirit is more than absence from conflict and happiness. It is the peace and joy of deep relationship with God and others.

God's Spirit inspires us to roll up the flaps of our tents. Roll them up to so we can let other people see into our tent.

And when we do, God's Spirit also blows through our tent. God's Spirit opens our hearts. And opens us up to others.

The language of science and accounting is mathematics. The language of music is rhythm and pitch. And the language of religion is metaphor and symbol. Baptism is a symbol. Baptism symbolizes entry into the peace and joy of long term, authentic, and unconditional relationships with God and with other authentic Christians.

In Christ, symbolized by our Baptism, we die to shallow, short term, inauthentic, relationships with God and other people, and are raised into that for which we all are hungry. Deep, long term, and authentic relationships.

But one of the obstacles to authentic relationship is our society's mantra of "me, myself, and I."

Movement 2 God's Spirit moves us from self-absorption and hubris to awareness of the needs of others.

One of our culture's favorite movies is "Home Alone." You all remember the plot. A self-absorbed family drives off to the airport, accidentally leaving the youngest child at home alone for several days. Self absorption is a common problem these days. Because ours is a "Me" generation. "Me, myself, and I." Nothing else matters. We ask, "What is in it for me?" We even mistakenly treat Baptism like it is a merit badge. We mistakenly think of it as one of our life goals. Something we have to do so we can, "Be somebody," as if we accomplish salvation ourselves. Baptism has become something that we do like a Boy Scout merit badge, and then after we do it, we quit going to church, because after all the only purpose of the church is to satisfy our need to be baptized. But Baptism is not an award for our efforts. It is symbolic of what Christ has done for us.

Baseball coaches sometimes use an exercise to get across how to catch baseballs to young children. They cut plywood in the shape of gloves, with a cord

to attach the glove to the hand. The young players quickly determine they cannot catch a baseball unless their catching hand gives way when the ball hits it, and cannot catch the ball unless their other hand cups over the ball to hold it in place. The coach calls out, "soft hands," because he wants the kids to move their wrists back as they receive the ball so it does not bounce off the plywood.

God's Spirit inspires us to bend with the wind, to be sensitive to the needs of others, and to shape ourselves around others instead of forcing others to shape themselves around us. God's Spirit opens our eyes and softens our hands to the needs of others. Softens our hands to let go and let God. To put God on a pedestal, not our career or even our families. God alone. Certainly not ourselves.

God's Spirit moves us from self-absorption and hubris to awareness of the needs of others. From self-absorption to selflessness. So we can let go and let God.

In Christ, symbolized by our Baptism, we die to self-absorption and hubris. And are raised into awareness of the needs of others. We die to self. And are raised into selflessness.

But there remains at least one question: is God's love active or passive?

Movement 3 God's Spirit moves us from spectatorship and passive love, to active participation and active self-giving love.

Once upon a time Debbie and I dined with the song writer Tia Sillers. She wrote a song that made its way to number one on the country music charts. Lee Ann Womack sang it. The title is, "I hope you dance." It goes like this:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder.

I hope you get your fill to eat, but always keep that hunger.

May you never take one single breath for granted.

I hope you still feel small when you stand by the ocean.

Promise me you'll give faith a fighting chance.

And when you get the choice to sit it out, or dance, I hope you dance.

I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance, never settle for the path of least resistance.

Living might mean taking chances, but they're worth taking.

Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance.

And when you get the choice to sit it out, or dance, I hope you dance.

Scripture tells us that yes, God wants us to experience love. But to experience love like God experiences it, we need to think of love as active. As in God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son. God's love is active, not passive. And the Gospels ask us to love each other as God loves us. Actively, not passively.

In Christ, symbolized by our Baptism, we die to spectatorship. We are raised into active participation. We become a player.

God's Spirit rolls up our sleeves so we can stop being spectators and get actively involved in the lives of others. Opens up our lives. Energizes us. Energizes us to do Jesus' work. The work of the church. Energizes us into action. A ministry of active participation.

Conclusion

In Christ, symbolized by our Baptism, we nail to the cross and are dead to superficial relationship, self-absorption, and spectatorship. We take off our old clothes of shallow acquaintance, hubris, and coldness. In Christ, we are raised into the joy of deep relationship, keen perception, and active love. And we put on Christ's clothes of authenticity, humility, and compassion.

Yes, at our Baptism, we promise to give God more than just a passing glance.

We promise to still feel small when we stand by the ocean.

And when we get the choice to sit it out, or dance, at our Baptism we promise to dance.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...