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“Drink This”

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Lakewood UMC

Mark 1:4-11

When ministers get together we often talk about the stupid things we have done over the years, like opening a wedding with the funeral liturgy, or completely blanking out while we are preaching, things like that.

At a recent clergy meeting one woman shared how she was getting ready to baptize a teenager. As he stood next to her, she took the huge bowl of baptismal water from the altar, lifted it up and said to him,

“Drink all of this for the forgiveness of sins.”

She said that teenager looked like he was going to cry.

Today is the day in the Christian calendar when we remember the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John in the Jordan River.

In typically succinct style, Mark tells us that Jesus came from Nazareth specifically to be baptized. After the baptism occurred, the sky split open, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice of God said:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Or, as we heard from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

“You are my son, my chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

When Jesus presented himself for baptism by John in the Jordan River, he wanted the healing powers of water to bless him as he began his ministry. Of course he was without sin, and he did not need baptism for validation.

This was his commissioning for ministry, his way of being set apart.

The Greek word for baptism means: “To Saturate.”

Baptism is a symbol of being saturated, soaked in God’s love.

Today I want to talk about what this Sacrament means for us, in terms of the symbolism of water, and listening for the voice of God.

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In every time and place, water has been symbolic of not only refreshment, but of new life, new beginnings.

“To understand water is to understand the cosmos, the marvels of nature, and human life itself.” (Masaru Emoto, *The Hidden Messages in Water*)

Water is considered sacred by Native Americans and Buddhists, and is increasingly sacred to those who live in hot, dry climates where it is scarce.

Even human tears are considered sacred in some spiritual traditions.

Water has properties of healing and life giving power.

Our Judeo-Christian tradition is indeed soaked with images of water.

There were waters at creation, covering the world.

Water was a gift given by God to the Israelites in the wilderness.

Moses was placed in a basket and put in the waters of the Nile, and he would part the Red Sea and lead God's people to the safety of the Promised Land.

Jesus described himself as the "Living Water come down from Heaven," and said, "The water that I give will be a spring of water, gushing up into eternal life."

And at his baptism, the blessing with water initiated his ministry and revealed his identity as God's own.

Now when Jesus received this stunning endorsement from God, he had not even begun his ministry. He had not healed or performed miracles or done much preaching or teaching. He had been in Nazareth with his parents, growing up. And yet, at his first major public appearance, he receives this blessing from God. It was not earned.

It was not a challenge to prove himself or make something of himself. It was a blessing and a gift which sealed his identity as the son of God.

That is what baptism does for us, as well.

It tells us who we are, precious and priceless children of God.

It is just one of the many ways we are reminded that no matter what we do or fail to do, no matter what a mess we make of our lives, we belong to God.

I like the way such a Covenant is described in Romans: "If we live we live to the Lord and if we die we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord."

That was the meaning of Jesus' Baptism, and it is the meaning of ours.

In the United Methodist Church, Baptism is considered a Sacrament.

That means it is a form of grace, a way that God blesses and empowers us to live holy lives. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism had a very practical approach to the Sacrament of Baptism. He believed that all 3 forms—sprinkling, pouring, and immersion were acceptable, for what really matters is that baptism represents new birth through God’s grace.

And so we Methodists baptize anybody--children, youth, and adults.

We practice infant baptism because we believe God’s grace goes before us, long before we can fully comprehend what it means.

We do not re-baptize, however. Occasionally someone comes to me and says they would like to be re-baptized because they did not fully understand the significance of it the first time. But baptism isn’t about US and what we understand. Who could ever understand the gift of God’s grace?

It is about God and what God has done for us. The redeeming and saving work of God is always with us and is truly beyond our understanding.

Through this blessing of baptism, we hear the voice of God saying, “You are my beloved child, and I am delighted with you.”

And yet, we don’t hear it. When was the last time you heard such a message?

If you hear the voice of God people would be alarmed and worried about you.

The only times in my life I have heard God’s voice are when I silence my own, as well as the many other voices which clamor for my constant attention.

These days even our cars can talk to us now and tell us when the gas tank is almost empty or the door is ajar.

Too many disembodied voices determine what we do and buy, what we eat, what we expect from others, even what we think about ourselves.

And God's voice is silenced.

In her best selling book *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes of her journey of recovery from profound grief, and how she learned to hear God’s voice.

She writes: “After my divorce I was in total pain...I made a decision to spend 10 days alone in silence in the middle of exactly nowhere.”

She traveled to the island of Gili Meno in Indonesia, located exactly at the equator where the sun rises and 6:30 and sets at 6:30 every single day of the year.

There are no motorized vehicles, only the constant sounds of the ocean.

Gilbert says: “It took me awhile to drop into true silence.

Even after I’d stopped talking, I found that I was still humming with language.

My organs and muscles of speech—brain, throat, and chest, back of the neck—vibrated with the residual effects of talking long after I’d stopped making sounds.

It took a surprisingly long time for all this pulsation of speech to fall away, for the whirling noises to settle. It took about 3 days.

In that state of silence, there was room for everything hateful, everything fearful, to run across my empty mind.”

She did this for days, allowing herself to feel her anger, pain, shame.

“When this was over, I was empty. I looked into my heart, at my own goodness, and saw its capacity, saw its love was infinite.

I knew then that this is how God loves us all and receives us all...

If one broken human being could experience such absolute forgiveness and acceptance of herself, then imagine—just imagine—what God, in all His eternal compassion, can forgive and accept.” (*Eat, Pray, Love*, pp. 327-328)

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My hope for all of us as we begin another year of ministry together is that we will experience, deep in our souls, the absolute forgiveness, acceptance and eternal compassion of God.

Because we have nothing more to offer this broken world than that which we have experienced in our own lives.

We will not see others as beloved children of God, until we know ourselves to be precisely that.

The more we drink in the refreshment of God’s love and grace, the more we will be like overflowing streams offering ourselves to heal the wounded, the broken, the lost.

I remember baptizing a toddler early in my ministry.

This adorable little girl was 3 years old with blond curls, and so happy.

During the service she was quite attentive. And when I baptized her she laughed. I said, “Adrianna, I baptize you in the name of God your Creator,” and I put water on her head, and she laughed.

Then I said, “I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ, your Redeemer,” and I put more water on her head. And she laughed. Then I said, “In the name of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life,” putting even more water on her head, and you guessed it, she laughed. I could have baptized that child all day long.

It was laughter from her soul, a deep delight, perhaps grounded in some inner knowledge that she was blessed and dearly loved.

There was nothing she could ever do or fail to do that would change the fact that she was God’s beloved child.

This little girl had the perfect response to the Sacrament of Baptism—laughter.

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Soon we will invite you to come forward to receive a blessing with water.

This is available to everyone, whether you have been baptized or not.

May it be a lasting blessing for you, a sign of God’s grace and something that makes you smile, if not laugh out loud.

You know, I think that pastor I mentioned earlier had it right.

Let us “Drink all of this,” as we are soaked in the love, forgiveness, peace of God.

Amen.