

**9 January, 2005: Rev Pressley Sutherland
Baptism - Pickled in Grace
Matthew 3.13-17**

The Reading:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Child, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Introduction

Today's gospel reading tells us of the tremendous love that God demonstrated for Jesus when he came up out of the waters of baptism. Something in that public act of obeying the call to be baptized (although he did not particularly need it in terms of the repentance that John was baptizing people into) moved God greatly. I'm not sure if anyone understood that by this act, Jesus was demonstrating the call that was placed upon his life and his reliance upon God in all things. And from this moment on, the Holy Spirit compels Jesus to live out his purpose among us with revelation, joy and sacrifice. It is this act, this sacrament of baptism, that has been forever transformed for us through the life, death and resurrection of this beloved young person.

And it is timely to reflect upon this sacrament as we are in the midst of winter. So the theme that we will explore together in our sermon today is entitled, '***Baptism: Pickled in Grace***'. But before we go further, would you join me in prayer. (Prayer for blessing of the message)

I enjoyed reading some of the information concerning the origins of the word we translate as 'baptise' from Greek. One particular article caught my eye from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance.

Baptizo—Strong's Concordance

Not to be confused with 911, bapto. The clearest example that shows the meaning of baptizo is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles and is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'dipped'(bapto) into boiling water and then 'baptised' (baptizo) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution. But the first is temporary. The second, the act of baptising the vegetable, produces a permanent change. When used in the New Testament, this word more often refers to our union and identification with Christ than to our water baptism. e.g. Mark 16:16. 'He that believes and is baptised shall be saved'. Christ is saying that mere intellectual assent is not enough. There must be a union with him, a real change, like the vegetable to the pickle! Bible Study Magazine, James Montgomery Boice, May 1989.

Pickling with strong stuff

As I was growing up in Virginia, there was one day of the year that my sister and I dreaded—pickle beet day. This was the day that my father would rouse us out of bed before the dawn light. He, my grandfather and I would take a great big tub out to our cinder-strewn drive way and build a fire under it. We filled the tub with water and the beets we harvested from the garden to boil until they softened. We would then take them down the hill to my grandmother's house where they would be pickled and canned.

There was a peculiar ritual that the women of our family had always followed as they prepared the pickling solution. My great-grandmother, who lived to be 104 years old would sit at the table, and as they had done for three-generations, they would spoon a taste of the liquid into her mouth periodically. If she swallowed it without a hitch, they would go back to the pot and add more vinegar and spices. Finally, the old woman would sputter, cough, gag, turn red and blue in the face as she lost her breath due to the pungency of the mixture. At that moment, a great 'hurrah' could be heard from the kitchen, as this had been the tell-tale sign for generations that the liquid was finally strong enough to create good pickled beets!

The pickling elements had to be strong enough or come the time when the jar was opened, the produce would either be bland or would have begun to break down due to the lack of stringency in the original recipe. The vegetables had to be immersed in strong stuff, stuff that takes your breath away, if they were to endure until the time that they were opened again.

Our baptism is the same. We need to be immersed in 'strong stuff', stuff that takes our breath away, that changes us and gives us flavour and character for living our Christian journey

Why do we pickle things by immersing them in liquids that preserve them? Why might we see a parallel between vegetables marinated in strong stuff and ourselves immersed in God's grace? We are gifted with this pickling, this 'baptizo', for many of the same reasons that humans learned to pickle foods-- so that during the winter time, when our fields lie fallow, we will be able to open a jar that we have sealed and find nourishment. We will find that we have flavour in our lives again as well. Saltiness, the salt of the earth, the stuff of faith; vinegar—closely related to wine, never benign, always undeniable, an epiphany of taste and potency that makes us lose our breath sometimes; sugar—a sweet treat of comfort and joy; spices—a new experience each time, a different flavour for each occasion as needed, perhaps not so unlike the spiritual gifts of God.

In this winter season, in light of the recent tsunami disaster and flooding, when to think of the element of water brings both fear and awe to our hearts, perhaps we would do well to remember our baptism or to consider being baptized if we haven't been already. In John's baptism, it was a symbolic bathing for the cleansing of sins in preparation for the coming of the one who would judge all hearts. But upon the baptism of Jesus, in the revelation of the Spirit that descended upon him and the words which were spoken of him from heaven, baptism was transformed for all who believe and are baptized in the name of the beloved. The symbolism has been enriched and changed forever. No longer are we to see it as merely a dip into the washing machine with a cake of fairy soap. In our baptism, you and I are asked to believe nothing less than that the audacious promise of resurrection is true-- sin, meanness, cruelty, the violence we commit against one another and in our hearts-have been forgiven, overcome, and exposed for the paper tigers that they are! This is both the promise and the reality we are born anew to live into everyday. In Christ's name, we believe, we declare and we have faith as we are submerged beneath the water, and pickled, that is completely transformed through the grace and love of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit for us.

Baptism can be an adventure of the soul, even though it lasts only a minute or so. When the one baptizing us lowers us under the surface, our senses are cut off from all that is above or was before. It is a world of unknowns, dangerous in that we cannot survive here alone, it is not our element. Primally, something in us remembers that the only time we have been able to survive under water was when we were completely reliant upon our mother whilst in the waters of the womb—our lifeline to her nourishing and sustaining us in the water. This is what grace is like—this is how faith becomes our umbilical cord—and we ask our Parent in heaven to become our daily nourishment and sustenance. When we are underwater, we have in effect placed ourselves completely in God's care through our faith. This symbolises the Christian way of viewing death as well—to face death as a Christian is simply to enter under the water again with faith in the promises of God given through Jesus to sustain and give us second life.

When the one baptizing us lifts us up into the air again, we are to know the exhilaration of being alive as we breathe the air again, the very breathe of God again—Ruach— the Hebrew word the means both breath and Spirit. The Holy Spirit descends upon us too and we finally hear the words that God is well pleased with you, God's beloved, just as Jesus promised. A new birth has happened. We have come through the testing, we have had the wisdom to believe in God's grace, to receive it in Christ's name, and now we will never be the same again. We have enacted and claimed the promise of the good news of resurrection in our baptism of body and Spirit.

We would do well to remember the power and potency of the pickling moment of our baptism, when we were sealed with the strong stuff that could be opened during the times of famine or fallowness, a little taste of heaven to bring faith when we lie dormant in the winters of our earthly life. This is what the sacrament of baptism can be for us if we don't lose the vitality of its meaning, and our agency in choosing to honour the spiritual baptism in our hearts with the outward rite of baptizing our bodies.

There has been much heaviness in the air lately, whether because of natural disasters or a million other personal reasons, it is hard to say. But many of us may be feeling flattened by the climate in the world or in the religion these days. Maybe it is time to remember the promise of resurrection again, which is not only the promise to the dead in body, but to the weary in soul, or as Jesus put it, the poor in spirit and heart as well.

God has a funny way of reminding us to open that jar of relational faith again and taste the grace and the joy of living when we most need it- if we will only choose to respond graciously to the invitation. This is what characterizes grace in our hearts—that unabashed joy upon coming up out of the water, just like the Ethiopian Eunuch baptized by Philip in Acts.

I came across an excerpt from a poem by Robert Frost, where in the midst of winter he had to make a choice of how to react to the act of a very precocious crow while he was brooding and walking:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

I suspect that many of us would have shot the crow instead. But there is something restorative in having a sense of humour even in the bleakest winter. I sometimes wonder if good-natured humour isn't a bit of that saltiness that Jesus was talking about. You've heard me say it before, but humour has gotten people through many winters in our history. I believe that the ability to be camp must surely be a charism of grace to our people. When we laugh, we find it almost impossible not to breathe deeply again—perhaps not so unlike that breathe of fresh life, inspiration, and simple, humbling joy we feel after we rise above the waters in our baptism.

I'm beginning to wonder if religion doesn't need to take a close look at ourselves as it seems we are in danger of losing our sense of humour, some of our saltiness. I don't know about you, but I find that when I've lost the ability to laugh at myself, very often I am on the very edge of losing the best parts of myself, in all of my humanity. I wondered the same things as I saw the religious folks burning their TV licenses outside the BBC in protest of Jerry Springer the Opera. From the parables of Christ to the Canterbury Tales, a good sense of humour about the follies of humanity richly rewards us in offering perspective and diffusing our propensity to only think that joyless holier-than-thou folks are part of the elect.

Jesus had a great sense of humour! He was really funny and joyful and not particularly puritanical. Whether he was satirizing the priesthood of his day--teasing them about liking the best seats and wearing gorgeous phylacteries, or telling stories of hapless playboys who end up wallowing in pig excrement before returning home, people loved his stories because they were told with humour and understanding. And people saw themselves in the characters, and rather than judging them, they began to identify with their failings and foibles. In this way, with great compassion and love for us, Jesus taught that we are all in need of grace and love. And we are all worth cherishing to God.

In the winters of our discontent, let us remember the taste of real life that is our promise in baptism. And remain resolute that we will not become completely bitter and hard through our pain or suffering. For new life is our constant assurance through Christ.

I would like to conclude with a quote from an artist that many may think was only bitter and hardened because of his well publicized struggles with depression. Perhaps in his words, we will see the flicker of vitality that is ultimately unquenchable in souls which have known even a small portion of love and grace, perhaps in the moment of our baptism:

"Many people seem to think it foolish, even superstitious, to believe that the world could still change for the better. And it is true that in winter it is sometimes so biting cold that one is tempted to say, "What do I care if there is a summer; its warmth is no help to me now." Yes, evil often seems to surpass good by far. But then, in spite of us, and without our permission, there comes at last an end to the bitter frosts. One morning the wind turns, and there is a thaw. And so I still have hope." Vincent van Gogh

May God bless us in the hearing of the Word. Amen