



Ordinary Water and Holy Promise

TEXT
Acts 8:26–40
Mark 1:9–11

January 17, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This room is God’s house; it is also our home. There’s a story we remember in this room. It is a story of all that God has done. It is a story of all that God will do.

And there is a cross that hangs here. Perhaps no other symbol declares with greater clarity that in this place the life of Jesus is central. And as Jenny told us last Sunday, the closer we come to the cross, the bigger it is.

But there is another gift of this room, and it is the baptismal font.

You can’t have a sanctuary without a baptismal font. Fonts come in all shapes and sizes. In some, you can be immersed completely. Presbyterians baptize infants, so immersion is not a good option for us.

On my stole, there is a shell with drops of water — because in some early church practices, water was scooped by a shell and poured over the one being baptized. I knew a beachfront church that had a baptismal font, where the water was placed in a large shell pulled from the beach not far from where the church was.

The presentation of the font varies from sanctuary to sanc-

tuary, but they all have water. You can’t have a sanctuary without that water.

Baptism tells us who we are.

I love this moment in Mark where Jesus is baptized. It says John baptizes him ... and the heavens are ripped apart ... and a voice says, “You are my son, whom I love.” Jesus is told who he is at his baptism. The same is true for you: Baptism declares you are God’s son; you are God’s daughter; you belong to God.

Now it is important to say something here. Baptism doesn’t make you belong to God. Baptism is the holy celebration of what is already and always true.

For someone who is not baptized, that does not mean they don’t belong to God. This is why: The church lacks the power to bring anyone to God or pull anyone from God. No, in baptism, we celebrate what is already true. We belong to God not because of anything we have done, but because we are claimed by God. Nothing can separate us from that love.

In a silly way, baptism is like a birthday. When we are little, birthdays mean we have a cake. There are candles to blow

out. Sometimes friends are called together to sing “Happy Birthday.”

But then we reach a certain age, and the cake is optional. As a matter of fact, skipping the day altogether is attractive. And you can do that. You can ignore your birthday. You can refuse birthday cake. But the truth is, you are still older. Because it’s not the cake that makes you older; the cake just celebrates what is already true.

Baptism is like that. It doesn’t make you God’s child. It celebrates what has always been true. You can be baptized or not, but you are still God’s child.

That’s why, in our practice, we baptize infants. It is clear that an infant contributes nothing to the sacrament, other than the need to be baptized. We don’t baptize an infant because of the infant’s righteousness or faith. No, that’s silly. We baptize infants not because of anything in them, but because of the love that dwells in God’s heart.

When we baptize little ones, we say their name — their whole name — and then we give them a new name: *Child of the Covenant*. That’s their

last name. They are claimed into the long story of God's covenant with God's children.

They will become other things. Who knows their profession? Some will be teachers or painters. Some will sell us our groceries or farm the land. Some will build things, and some will heal bodies or souls.

But we know today who they are: God's children. In this room, we are reminded who we are. That's why this water is here every week. We can't have a sanctuary without that water. Every week you come in, and it will remind you who you are: You belong to God ... and that changes everything.

That's what we see in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The Spirit leads Philip to a eunuch from Ethiopia.

Perhaps you know that a eunuch was forbidden from entering the temple. It's right there in Deuteronomy. They don't belong.

Perhaps you know that Ethiopians were not the right people to be included. Racism has a long history. Ethiopians didn't belong.

He was a man of power — wealthy enough to ride a chariot, hospitable enough to offer Philip a ride, educated enough to read Hebrew — but still cut off and ostracized. He doesn't belong.

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't belong?

The problem is that neither Philip nor the eunuch knew who they were. The eunuch asks one question: "What is

to prevent me from being baptized?"

Well, there were more than enough things to prevent him from being baptized: his race; his sexual status. He was from Ethiopia, for goodness' sake.

The question is, Why in the world would he be baptized? And there is only one reason: because he is God's child. That's the testimony of the Spirit. The Spirit leads Philip to see that we are all God's children.

The eunuch is baptized, and it changes the whole world. I'm not trying to be hyperbolic. It changes the whole world.

This is what I mean: When you know you belong to God, it changes everything.

When I was a kid, my parents had rules I had to follow. I don't remember them all. They weren't unique: elbows off the table; chew with your mouth closed; make up your bed; speak to adults with respect, calling them Mr. and Mrs; give ten percent of your allowance to the offering plate on Sunday; write thank-you notes; come home by 11:00 (not 11:10); go to Sunday school and church.

And I would say: "Why, why, why do I have to live this way? Other kids don't have to live like this, why do I?"

Oh, there were explanations; there were encouragements. There was the occasional "Because I said so!" But in the end, the answer was: "Because this is who we are in this family. We are Ares. This is how we behave."

Identity is more than a name tag; it is a way of being

in this world. When we forget who we are, it is painful.

I imagine many of you, like me, watched the football game yesterday. We have been in a season of football — college bowl games and professional playoffs. It is quiet an aggressive game. I enjoy it, although I have grown less comfortable with being entertained by something that could be doing significant harm to the participants.

I haven't seen the movie *Concussion*, but I imagine it will leave me unsettled. When you are on a football field, it is allowed to hit your opponent. It's not just allowed; it's expected. You are expected to throw the full weight of your body into them, and it is hoped that the encounter will be so painful that it gets in the head of your opponent. Some of those encounters are bone-crushing. That's just part of the game. That's football.

But here's the thing: Even if you are a professional football player, if you step outside of those lines, and you live like that, it's not only not OK; it's evil.

We have read more than a few stories of football players who get confused about what's real and what's a game. And they act like they are playing football off the field.

If you confuse who you are — if you think you are a football player, rather than a human being or rather than a child of God — you have confused what's real and what is a game.

I am not saying this to point a finger at someone else; I am using this as an illustration. I think sometimes they forget that they are not really football players. They are really human beings who happen to play a game, but the ways of the game are not the ways of real life.

We aren't our profession. We aren't our race. We aren't our status or privilege.

We are God's children. We belong to God. We need to be reminded of that every week.

So every week there will be baptismal water in this room to remind you of who you are.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.