

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God who gives more than we realize, we come to your house to praise you. You hear praise in our words and our deeds. May we always sanctify your house by welcoming those we know and those we do not know, here and in your world. May we treat all who walk in these doors and all who walk in our lives as a representative of Jesus Christ. Even far away, we name your children are in need around the world. Many suffer from grief they name and grief they cannot. For those struggles we have named here, those struggles we do not yet know, and for the struggles that are unnamed aloud, we lift them up to you, Gracious One. Hear our prayers.

Holy God, we remember today the baptism of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist, an act that demonstrated your grace by revealing your Son to the entire world. As we recognize the Baptism of Jesus, it calls us to remember our own baptisms. In the midst of recollection, empower us to take hold of the true meaning of baptism in that you are full of Grace; you give us grace to be forgiven for the big things, the little things, and everything in between. While we are so grateful, we are also very hesitant to take hold of this reality. Let us not take grace lightly, but let us take grace on courageously by seeking to be grace ourselves. Let us demonstrate radical grace in a world that desires punitive sanction and harsh repayment for sins. We pray all these things in the name of the one who came to be Grace to and for us, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

## SERMON

When nothing existed but chaos, God swept across the waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah, God saved those on the ark through water. After the flood, God set in the clouds a rainbow. When God saw God's people as slaves in Egypt, God led them to

freedom through the sea. Their children God brought through the Jordan to the Land, which God promised. In the fullness of time, God sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by the Spirit. He called his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations. Through these acts of God's salvation, remember your baptism and be thankful.

That is an adapted prayer from the United Methodist hymnal around the ritual of baptism. Baptism is a sacrament, a way that we recognize, respond to, and are fed by God's loving grace. Every time we pour out the baptismal waters, we are given an important directive: remember your baptism. Baptism is an important part of the life of the Christian. It can be looked upon as an order, as something that has to be accomplished to have the Christian name. Is it important? Of course, but we aren't baptized because it is enforced by God, but we are baptized because it is a meaningful response to grace and our desire to follow our God. Let's look again at the work of God in this scripture on Jesus' baptism, understand what it means to remember our baptisms, and see how we can live more effectively living our baptisms.

Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan. Remember, the Jordan was one of the dirtiest rivers in all of creation, so it's curious that this would be the place to be cleansed. It did happen with Naaman in the Old Testament; it happens here. John saw him coming, and he was completely caught off-guard by Jesus' desire to be baptized. "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" He's essentially saying, "I'm not worthy; you should have my job!" But Jesus doesn't buy that stuff. "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." The New Interpreter's commentary is saying that Jesus is telling John that it must be done this way to fulfill God's

just or right will. I believe that this is because God's methods have a way of turning what we expect on its head. Having John baptize Jesus fulfills the righteousness of God. At this statement, John can do nothing but follow through. And when he does, it certainly is something to behold. The sky opens up with radiance and the Spirit of God, like a dove, descends. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." Although scripture does not say anything about it, I'm sure that all stood in awe, amazed by this sight.

Jesus' baptism was unique. None of our baptisms, at least none that I know of, occurred with such grandeur, and the meaning of baptism that they recognized then was different than the one we celebrate today based on the ministry and work of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it calls us to remember our baptisms. Do you remember your baptism? Let me step back a bit more...what does it mean to remember your baptism? Well, first of all, it can mean you recall the events of your baptism. Some of you may have been baptized when you were an infant or very young. You may not be able to recall the events of your baptism. That is totally fine; it is perfectly acceptable to be baptized as an infant. Mine was when I was about 8 or 9. My mother thought it was important that we decide when we are baptized, and so this was the time I decided I wanted to receive my baptism. At that time, I realized that our long-time pastor Stan Ryder was retiring, and so I thought it would be most meaningful for him to conduct the baptism. There was a big lead-up to it; many of my family members came to recognize it alongside me. I remember walking to the front of the sanctuary, answering the questions about my faith with my family all around me, and then receiving the water on my head by sprinkling of the water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I recall doing a quick self-assessment when these occurred. In my wondrous youth, I thought that I would feel something spectacular, that there would be a

rushing wind or maybe a dove comes down from heaven and a light surrounds me. I thought there would be a dramatic change in my life. Nope. Nothing happened the way I might have expected. But there was meaning there. It was meaningful to have my family all around to witness this ritual, as well as my church community.

Obviously, at the time, I didn't fully realize the many aspects of baptism. True, it was an affirmation of my faith. It was a reminder that our sins are washed away. It was a chance for my family and community to affirm me as a member of the Christian family. All of these are true, and all of these are quite important in a well-rounded understanding of baptism. But at the same time, I missed an integral point: it's not necessarily about change after the fact but what this act means. We are constantly called to grow, but the act of baptism is an affirmation of the grace that God already has injected into our lives and an affirmation that God will continue to give grace to us at all points of the journey as we devote ourselves to God. As United Methodists, we believe in Grace through all points of our lives and the calling to respond to that grace. We recognize that Grace is another word for God working at all points in our lives, calling us towards God's good purposes when we realize it and when we do not. Before we knowingly hear God's call, we recognize that God provides us with what we call prevenient grace. God works in our lives and calls us even before we know it is God. When we submit ourselves to God and seek to follow God through our lives, we believe in God's justifying grace, that grace that makes us right in God's eyes. And when we grow in maturity with God, we grow in God's sanctifying grace, which guides us toward purity in our lives. Grace is acknowledged so deeply in this simple act of baptism. I wonder if Christ's baptism is the acknowledgement of Grace coming into the world, named by God and blessed so deeply in the person of Jesus.

Some of us are privileged to recall the events of our baptisms. Others of us are not. Neither group is excused from the radical act of remembering our baptisms. When we remember our baptisms, we're doing something quite magnificent. Just think of the word "remember." We automatically think of it as the act of recalling, recounting the events from our point of view. But there's much more. Now take it apart: "re-member." It's essentially putting something back together; in another way, it's bringing something back to life. To "re-member" is to put it all back together the way it was, like the opposite of "dismember." When we remember, we bring new life to our lives and actions through a renewed understanding of what we have known and done before. When we remember our baptisms, we remember the presence of Grace in all of our lives.

Grace is not cheap; it is costly. It means we live in this radical calling of God that changes how we live and see the world. The Grace of God cannot be domesticated. The Grace of God works beyond our knowledge and our perception at the moment, moving in ways that we can only understand in retrospect. And it moves in everyone. Think about it: God's grace is working through every one, now and always, because of God's prevenient grace. God is working in the person next to you, God's grace is working in the person who cuts you off on the Interstate, God's grace is working in the person who annoys you so much. God's grace is working in the person who attends church regularly every week. God's grace is working in the person who has been injured by the church, who thinks that the church is full of hypocrites. God's grace is working in the staunch Republican and the radical Democrat. God's grace is working in the person who has hurt you badly, and in the person you have hurt. When grace is the focus of baptism, and when we fully remember our baptism in all the ways the word "remember" holds, we see the world through new

eyes. God is working in the world and in our neighbors in ways that we do not understand, no matter how much we work at figuring it out. Do we have the courage to name God's grace working in the other person, when we like them or when we really dislike them? If we do, then it changes how we approach our neighbor. They may not be our best friends; they may not even be healthy for us to be around, but we see them as blessed and broken, fully sinner and saint at the same time, and in need of the love of God. Some see this fact readily, and some do not, but it does not change the fact that God loves them, God cares for them deeply, and we are called to be representatives of that love. Above all, we do not take on grace and being grace in this world out of a sense of obligation. We do not receive baptism with a sense of obligation, indeed, we do not receive the Christian calling with a sense of obligation, so we should not receive the calling of baptism as an obligation either. Above all, it is being grace as loving response to all the grace our God has offered to us.

Remember your baptism. It's not only how we recollect (or not) the act of being baptized but what the act of baptism names. It names that we come into a new community, a community where we are acknowledged as God's beloved children. It names that we enter a covenant with each other of mutual accountability and care. It names that God's grace has already and is working in our lives, whether or not we recognize it, as well as in the lives of others. It names that we be actors on that grace in sharing it with others and working to bring grace to the world all the more tangibly as representatives of Jesus Christ. God is at work here, and we lovingly take on that calling with awe and eagerness. Although we cannot hear it audibly, we recognize God is saying to each of us, "This is my child, with whom I am well pleased." Indeed, we are all God's children, and God is undoubtedly well pleased. Amen and Amen.