

THE EVE OF THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, BAPTISM OF TYNAN MAGOOLAGHAN | OCTOBER 7, 2023

PHILIPPIANS 3:4b-14 | MATTHEW 21:33-46

As always, Tynan, this is for you. If the rest of you want to stay, that's fine. If you want to use this time to run some errands, just be back in nine minutes.

Tynan, you are being baptized today. This is an exciting day, one that your parents, your family, this congregation, and I have been looking forward to. Whenever we celebrate a baptism, there's a lot of people and stuff to coordinate. We need to make sure we have fresh water in the font. Sponsors. The baptismal candle. The oil stock. The parish register. The certificates. The baptismal napkin that you would think would have a special name but—as turns out—is just called the baptismal napkin. We also need to make sure you are here. And getting a baby to church—not to mention all your accessories—is no small feat.

Exciting as all this stuff is, it can also make baptism seem really complicated, which it's not. So I'm going to try to keep this really simple. And I'm going to try to demystify some of our “church vocab.” Your baptism is all about relationship.

To begin with, it's about your relationship with God. And your relationship with God comes from Jesus's relationship with God. In Matthew's gospel, there's a story about Jesus's baptism. Matthew says that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, he received the Holy Spirit, God said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” and Jesus began his public ministry.

What God said about Jesus in his baptism—you are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased—that's now what God says to you in your baptism. The word we use in church for Jesus's life-giving and sustaining relationship with his Father is the Holy Spirit. So when I mark your forehead with the sign of the cross and say that you've been sealed with the Holy Spirit, that means that Jesus's relationship with God extends to you. You are the beloved with whom God is well pleased. That means that you can talk to God the way Jesus talks to God. You can pray to God the way Jesus prays to God. And you can trust in God the way Jesus trusts in God. Thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, you are always growing into Christ's way of life.¹

Your relationship with God has some distinctive features that make it different from the other relationships in your life. For one, it's initiated by God. It doesn't depend on how well-behaved or impressive you are. It doesn't depend on how religious or pious you are or how much you pray. God wants to be in loving relationship with you not because you're lovable. But simply because God loves. And the design of God's great love includes you.

A number of years ago, I was doing baptismal prep with a family that had grown up in a more evangelical/Baptist environment. And after we walked through the service, one of the parents said, “Everything in the bulletin looks fine. But when is the part when I say something to the congregation about why I choose to love God?” And the answer is that you don't have to. Because in Jesus, God chooses to love you.²

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality From the New Testament to John of the Cross* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1990), 18. Life in the Spirit is a “new state of affairs, the new ‘position’ in which the believer can address the Father as Jesus had done...”

² Luther in the Large Catechism: “For my faith does not make baptism; rather, it receives baptism... [Baptism] is not bound to our faith but to the Word.” *Book of Concord 463*.

The word that we use in church for this God-initiated relationship is grace. Grace means that you don't have to act or behave a certain way for God to draw near to God. It also means that you don't need to make some statement or confession of faith or choose to be loved by God. Grace means that your relationship with God is given and entrusted, not earned or accomplished. We don't go to God. God comes to us.

Another feature of this relationship is that it's unbreakable. When you are given Jesus's relationship with his Father, it isn't just one of grace, but it's one that never ends. After all, Jesus's relationship with God the Father was so strong that it survived not just the perils of life but even the presence of death. If death couldn't overcome their bond, nothing could. And it's the same for you.

The word, phrase really, that we use for this in church is "eternal life" or "everlasting life." That means that there is nothing in all of creation that can extinguish your relationship with God, not even death. As St. Paul once put it, "If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." So even when, as our commendation puts it, "the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over," we are still embraced by the love of God. We live in God, and we die in God. And so even in death, we live.³

But there's one more thing we have to say about baptism, Tynan. This relationship isn't just some private thing between you and God. It involves all of creation. At the end of Jesus's baptism in Matthew's gospel, Jesus receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and begins his public ministry. He begins his service of publicly proclaiming God's great deeds of love and embodying God's mercy in the world. Of announcing that what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven, God and God's ways of being, are at hand in the world.

And it's the exact same for you. Today is the beginning of your public ministry within and among God's people. You join all of us as we "proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace." You continue God's mission of reconciling and renewing creation. And your life will convey to others what difference it makes to live in relationship with Jesus's Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's a tall order. But here's the good news. In your baptism, you have everything you need to do it. The gift of the Holy Spirit that unites us in the body of Christ. The love of God given unconditionally and without end. And a communion of people who will help and support you along the way.

So welcome, Tynan, into the body of Christ and the mission we share. We are so excited to see all that God does in and through your life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ "Because it runs across the fact of death, life in Christ is eternal life. There is a life in the triune God that we possess now and after death, in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ante and post mortem do not mark and crucial difference with respect to it." Kathy Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 108.