

It Does Matter

From the wonderful servants at King's Closet, I received a wonderful book, "Children's Letters to God". Let me share a few with you this morning.

"Dear God, Are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair. Sylvia"

"Could you write more stories? We have already read all the ones you have and begin again. Gratefully, Emily"

"I have got to know something – what is it like in heaven? I know it is nice, but what kind of nice? What happens when it rains? Marty"

"Are you real? Some people don't not believe it. If you are you better do something quick. Harriet Ann"

As I read the letters in this wonderful book, I delight in the innocence and honesty of children. Then I recall Jesus' words about being like a child, and Paul's words about seeing now as through a mirror dimly, and am reminded that though I may have lived a number of years more than these young scribes, and though I may have experienced much more of life, and even though I have read, studied, considered and conversed about the things of God and humanity, we share more in our simplicity and naivety than differ in wisdom and understanding of all that God is.

Last Sunday our District Superintendent shared in reading and pondering the wonderful story of the Baptism of Jesus. It is a story of wonder, a story of affirmation and a story of faith, as is the sacrament of Baptism. The church universal understands the holiness and power of Baptism, proclaims and recognizes it as a gift from God, a commission and command from Jesus, and an act of obedience for those who become disciples.

Throughout the book of Acts, the recounting of the birth of the Christian church, Baptism is a significant act and teaching. As listeners chose to become followers, Baptism was both sought and mandated. Then, as is still the case today, membership in the Christian church is predicated on one partaking in the sacrament of Baptism and making a public proclamation of faith. In the United Methodist tradition, the sacrament of Baptism often begins with the parents presenting an infant or child, and is completed when that child has grown in age and understanding, undergone a significant course of study, asks to and makes the profession of faith. Confirmation is a part of the sacrament of Baptism and the fulfilling of one of the promises made by parents and congregation.

I am seeking out those who in 7th grade or above who are ready to spend time in prayer, pondering and participating with me and others in order to consider making a

faith commitment and becoming members of this congregation. My terms for this process are "Quest" for those in 7 – 12 grades and "Discovery" for those in their adult years. It is my practice to tailor these experiences based on those participating and to encourage some of the current membership to join us.

Yet as important and holy as this Sacrament is, it can and has also been a dividing point for the church universal. The passages shared this morning tell of one of the first controversies over the act of Baptism. It is easy in our reading and biblical imaginations to see this as a simple discussion and conversation, yet it was an emotional, intellectual, anything but placid, foundational debate at the highest level of the developing church.

This debate emphasized two elements: 1) that the act of Baptism was not to be taken lightly, that there is a significant obligation to God at its foundation, and 2) that like all that is of God, Baptism is beyond our complete understanding, explaining or managing. This is why the term "sacrament", which is defined in the American Heritage dictionary as "a visible sign of an inward grace, especially one of the solemn Christian rites considered to have been instituted by Jesus Christ to symbolize or confer grace," is used in characterizing Baptism. Notice also how this definition mirrors the words of John Wesley in today's worship preparation thought: "Baptism is an outward sign and means of inward change wrought by the Spirit," which echoes words of those considered wise in the church going back to Augustine.

As I pondered, and studied the thoughts of those far wiser and more learned than I, I was struck that complete agreement within the circle of apostles is not indicated. The TR version, a scholarly version which stems from the Greek texts, reads thus: "*When they heard these things*", speaking of Paul's dream, the vision of the man from Caesarea, and, perhaps most significantly, the manifestation of God's spirit, "***they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance***" (emphasis mine).

They held their peace and glorified God – not that they agreed with all that had happened or were of one understanding. It appears that they acknowledged that the working of God, that God's grace, was apparent, although not in the way they expected or understood, and that the working of God was of greater importance than their ability to understand, explain or even agree. John Wesley instructed those called "Methodist" to strive to live in fellowship with those they differed with the words "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

As differently as we, the church universal understands, practices and acknowledges Baptism today, we share in the belief that God's grace is wrapped in, through, around, underneath and on top of, all that is human in Baptism. That Baptism is about acknowledging, accepting and celebrating the grace that God alone can grant.

Grace is amazing, wonderful, and another Godly gift that we grabble to understand and explain. In the Wesleyan understanding we speak of God's preparing, accepting, and sustaining Grace, using the terms prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying, identifying not three different types of grace but three ways and life situations in which humanity experiences God's one amazing grace.

All of humanity is surrounded by God's grace, whether or not they are aware or responsive, this is what Wesley termed prevenient grace, that grace that is God calling to and softening our hearts. Justifying grace is that which removes any thing which would provide a hindrance between one who has accepted God's grace and God. Sanctifying grace is the Wesleyan term for the working of God's grace in the transformation of the believer more and more into the image of Christ.

God's grace is a wonderful gift to humankind. Grace is God's love freely offered to us. We do not do anything to "earn" it. Baptism is an outward sign of an inner acknowledgement and acceptance of God's grace. God mighty acts in the lives and hearts of those who love and accept him, and from that love and acceptance choose to pledge their lives in the sacrament of Baptism; is something we experience, something we know to be true, and always somewhat beyond us.

God's grace is greater than all our sins. God's grace is greater than all our differences in practice and opinion. God's grace is that which washes, restores and recreates us, in the moments we partake in the sacraments and in all the moments of life. So, with a childlike simplicity and faith, today I add my verse to the young writers' whose words we shared as we began:

Dear God, Do you understand what happened, and how when I was Baptized? I don't, so I'm trusting in you. Joy