

Means of Grace: Baptism

TEXT: Luke 24:13-35

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on April 14, 2024

To rewind to last week, for the first 26 years of my life, I was an American Baptist. That's a different beast than the Southern Baptists, but all Baptist churches got their name from their insistence in "Believer's baptism," which means that they will not baptize children who are not old enough to make their own profession of faith. So, this sermon could also be titled, "How a good Baptist girl found herself baptizing babies."

In Baptist traditions there *is* a church ceremony for a new baby. Generally called a "Dedication," the parents take almost exactly the same set of vows that are taken here in a baptism—they declare their own faith and promise to raise the child as a Christian in the church—but for the Baptists, actual baptism is reserved for those who can make that decision on their own and is always done by full immersion, with many not recognizing infant baptism as legitimate. As I mentioned last week, communion is also withheld until after baptism.

In the Baptist church in Rhode Island where I was raised, I was dedicated as an infant and baptized at age 11 on Palm Sunday, along with many of my peers. I remember the fear we all had that our pastor was elderly and might drop us as he laid us backwards down under the water; and how relieved we were when a deacon was there standing just out of view to help. On Maundy Thursday that same week, we all sat together and received communion for the first time.

I remember actually having an argument with my mother about my baptism. She was worried that I might just be going along with my friends in deciding to be baptized and that it wasn't really my decision. That argument with her has always perplexed me. I mean, I was the kid who, instead of asking for a tree house in the back yard, wanted a chapel. And when I didn't get one, I set up an altar in the east-facing dormer window in my bedroom. But it was still critical for her to be sure that I fully understood what I was doing and what it would mean for the trajectory of my life.

So, the teaching about baptism—reinforced by arguing with my mother about my own understanding and intention—was ingrained deeply within me. When I moved south of the Mason Dixon line in the mid 1980's, the only Baptist churches around were Southern Baptist. My husband and I tried that for a year, but ultimately landed at a United Methodist church in Maryland, the first time anyone I know in either of our families had joined a Methodist church.

After a move to Florida, and seven years as a member of a United Methodist church there, I went off to seminary; but my mother was still pushing for me to become ordained as an American Baptist pastor. Ultimately, I decided to go with the UMC, first as a very practical matter. If I successfully completed the ordination process, the UMC guaranteed me a full-time appointment and a minimum salary.

I knew that, as a woman, I would have trouble finding a Baptist church that would call me, even though the American Baptists began ordaining women in 1882 and it took the Methodist Church in the US until 1956. Southern Baptists still won't ordain women. And if a Baptist church did take me, I'd be paid less than a man. By that time, I was divorced and I had to be able to make ends meet on my own. So...guaranteed full-time appointment and guaranteed minimum salary it was.

I went off to Emory, taking the usual seminary courses, but also taking the courses specific to those seeking ordination in the United Methodist Church. As I began to study and understand Methodist theology and history, I found a lot of resonance; and back in my home church in Florida I had already begun the years-long ordination process for the UMC.

In my last year in seminary, it was finally time to go before the 40-person Board of Ordained Ministry in the Florida Conference of the UMC. That's terrifying on many levels, but it was more so for me because there was one aspect of Methodism that I hadn't yet been able to reconcile with my Baptist roots—no surprise that it would be infant baptism.

Further, I knew that, in those interviews with groups large and small, someone was going to notice that I had been a Baptist for 26 years and was going to ask me to defend the UMC position on baptism. As the interview approached, I got panicked. I knew the theological arguments. I'm a good student. I did my reading and got A's in those courses. But I'm not a good liar, and I knew when the Board asked me about it, it would be obvious that I had reservations.

I made appointments with every professor I respected and asked them to explain it again. "Please," I said. "I have to believe this by next week!" When I got in my car to make the six-hour drive from Atlanta to Lakeland, Florida for the interview, I was still struggling. Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian journey. Yup. Got that. It's a "means of grace," according to John Wesley. God is the actor, not us. Yup, got that, too. But I couldn't get over the line.

And then, driving along, I remembered a visit to a Christian bookstore in Providence back sometime in my early twenties. I had walked into the store—the only customer. The young man behind the counter greeted me and asked, almost immediately, if I was saved. This was still in the more fundamentalist phase of my life, so that question didn't faze me. "Yes!" I answered. "When?" he asked me, wanting to hear all about the earth-shattering moment that had driven me to my knees to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I told him that I had been raised in a Christian home and had been saved all my life.

Well, you would have thought I had just ripped off a face mask and proven myself to be the devil. "Then you're not saved," he told me. "That's unbiblical." I was shocked. As someone who, by that point in my very religious young life, had already read the Bible through multiple times from cover to cover, I knew he was wrong. But I was in no mood to argue with him. I just left the store.

On the drive home, I thought of all the things I should have said to him; and I almost turned around to go say them—but didn't. But what I still want to say to him to this day is this:

"You're a young man. Presumably someday you'd like to have a family of your own. Isn't my life the life you want for your children? To grow up never remembering a time that I didn't know and love Jesus, to hear hymns sung at my bedside and have my mother pray with me from before I could even speak? To be in church every Sunday of my life, even when we were on vacation, and gladly so?

Would you rather your children make an abundance of terrible choices that land them in such misery that, at some point later in their lives, they realize they need to repent and turn to Jesus? Wouldn't you want your children to be able to answer you the way I did—that I literally cannot remember a time when I was not a Christian, a time I didn't know and love Jesus, a time I didn't feel securely in God's arms?

At which point in my life, Sir, was I not a Christian? Was it singing Jesus loves me with the cherub choir at church? Was it memorizing Bible verses in Sunday School? Was it saying grace at meals or praying for hungry people around the world with my mother at bedtime?"

As I remembered that whole thing as I drove to Lakeland, I still remember the spot on I-75, just after crossing from Georgia into Florida, when the whole baptism thing came crashing on me like a ton of bricks and split my mind wide open. Way back then, on the drive home from Providence, a Baptist girl in her early twenties had constructed the case for infant baptism while imagining what I would say to an offensive guy in a Christian bookstore.

Because the answer is, "Of course I was a Christian all those times. I was raised in a Christian home to know and serve a loving God. Was I an immature Christian? Of course. Was I free from sin? By no means. But was I an unregenerate soul in need of saving? Was I not on the path? If some disease had taken me at age 2 or 5 or 7, would God have looked at the Book of Life and said, "Nope, don't see your name?" Not a chance. I had God on speed dial by the time I was five.

My Christian journey began at birth; and baptism marks the beginning of our Christian journey. Baptism as an infant would have been perfectly appropriate for me, because that's when my Christian journey began, formed before I could speak by my mother's prayers, encouraged by my church community as I learned the stories about

the man in the paintings on the church walls and those who had come before him. In an instant, I went from “understanding” infant baptism to “believing” it.

And then, there in the car heading for Lakeland, I got mad. I got mad that my faith as a child wasn’t recognized as being both real and my own at my birth with the mark of baptism. I was mad that I had to wait to take communion until I was 11. My church and sacraments class at Candler had taught me how to commune an infant by dipping my pinkie finger in the juice and letting the baby take it like a pacifier and, by golly, that would have been perfectly fine for me.

Do babies not get to eat dinner? Are babies not part of the family until they can fully understand what it means to be a member of a family? I was a citizen of the United States from birth. It’s opt-out, not opt-in. I was born into Christian faith. Does Jesus put me in another room until I can “Fully understand?” And who fully understands the ways of God anyway? Certainly not the dude in the Providence bookstore who sought to remove God’s grace from my life because I couldn’t name the day and the hour of my salvation. Or rather, he wasn’t satisfied that the day and hour matched the day and hour of my birth.

And, after I was done being mad, it was with a twinge of sadness that I felt the door closing on my Baptist upbringing. At long last, I got it. It’s not like Methodists pull babies off the street and baptize them. It’s not magic water that protects us from hell—or from anything, really. Awful stuff happens to the baptized and unbaptized alike, as every person hearing this can attest.

Baptism is a mark signifying God’s grace working in and through us at the beginning of our Christian journey, whether it begins at birth or comes much later. Maybe we’re the ones who recognize the moment and ask for baptism. But maybe it’s our Christian parents who know God holds their newborn in loving embrace even though the child has no idea.

I’ve baptized my share of adults, and if they wanted to be fully immersed, I’ve gone to rivers and pools and done that, too. I baptized my grandfather when he was 92. Baptism is not an achievement; it’s a mark to commemorate our beginning on the Christian path, no matter who put us there or when.

In the United Methodist Church, we have almost identical ceremonies to the Baptists for new babies whose parents are Christian, and for children who have been raised in the church who reach an age where they decide for themselves whether or not they want to continue on that Christian path. Another marker.

In the Baptist church parents dedicated infants and baptized those who were old enough to decide that they wanted to take the name Christian for themselves. In the United Methodist Church, we baptize infants whose parents promise to set their children on the Christian path and then later those children have the opportunity to confirm that path—or to leave it if they wish. That’s what Confirmation is all about.

But we don’t pretend they’re not on the Christian journey when they’re younger, even though they are immature and maybe even grumpy about going to church on a Sunday. For us, if you’re baptized, you’re a Christian on the road until you decide to get off it. And, from the get-go, you get to come to the table and eat with the grownups.

I got to Lakeland feeling absolutely ready to explain how I made the shift to infant baptism. And then, guess what? They never asked me!

But with my own life’s experience as background, I want to say a few more things about grace in John Wesley’s understanding of it. Wesley believed that God’s grace surrounds us all—Christian and otherwise—from our first breath; but that we experience that grace and God’s presence with us differently at different stages in our lives.

When people don’t realize they’re surrounded by God’s grace—either because they’re too young or otherwise unable to understand, or even if they simply don’t believe in God or grace—Wesley called that “Prevenient Grace.” From the Latin “Pre” and “Venio,” it means “the grace that comes before.” Grace before we know it’s there or understand what we’re experiencing. God’s presence before we are able to recognize it.

The old saying that life is about the journey not the destination is a pretty good summary of how Wesley saw Christian life. We find way posts and set down markers along the path, but it’s traveling along the road that

matters. Moving forward. Doing all the good we can every day; not beating ourselves up for what we did yesterday, but resolving to do better tomorrow. Walking with Jesus, making amends, leaving the path a little better because we have been on it.

The man in the Providence bookstore believed that Jesus walked along a special road, and that you needed to find out about that road and make a conscious decision to move to it before you could be considered “saved.” Wesley believed that Jesus travels every road—that it’s really all just one road and Jesus is always on it—first as one person and then as another, or as a simple presence when we’re alone.

And that’s why I changed this morning’s Scripture reading from what’s in the bulletin to the post-resurrection story of the two disciples traveling on the road in Luke 24. Neither disciple was among the twelve. One was named Cleopas and the other is left unnamed, and they’re traveling together, on foot, the seven miles from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus late on Easter afternoon.

They’re talking about everything that had happened to Jesus and all the wild reports about people having seen him alive after his crucifixion. But they didn’t choose to stick around in Jerusalem to find out more and are heading out. They’re joined by another traveler. It’s Jesus, but they don’t recognize him; just as Mary Magdalene didn’t recognize him when meeting him in the garden outside the tomb. The two disciples engage Jesus on this same topic and Jesus debates with them about the Scriptures. But they still don’t know who’s walking with them.

That story is a perfect image of what Wesley called “prevenient grace.” We’re walking with Jesus even when we don’t know who it is, because Jesus chooses to walk with us—even when we’ve decided that we had no interest in sticking around to see if the stories about Jesus’ resurrection were true. Jesus chooses to be with us anyway.

When the group got to their destination in Emmaus, it was getting late. Hospitality was perhaps *the* most important public virtue throughout the entire biblical period, and remains so today in the Middle East and elsewhere. So, the two encourage their traveling companion to enter the village with them and stay with them. And then, when Jesus broke the bread at dinner, the ritual that always began every dinner, they recognized him.

Wesley would call that moment of recognition, “Justifying grace.” All of a sudden, the dots get connected and we realize God has been with us all along; we just didn’t realize it. Maybe we thought God only showed up wearing a halo; maybe we thought God could only be a white guy; or someone in a religious profession. Or maybe we thought there was no God—that there is no ultimate force in the universe and we’re just floating out there on our own, a random genetic accident on the third rock from the sun.

And then, for whatever reason, often a moment of great distress but sometimes in a moment of great beauty or mystery, we recognize God in our midst—in a kind cashier, in the janitor cleaning our hospital room floor, in the rushing of a river, in the eyes of a wolf. Justifying Grace: The revelation that God has been with us all along, everywhere, and the truth of Jesus saying that, “Whatever you do to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

Once the disciples recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread at Emmaus, he vanishes. Poof! But the two men don’t just decide they have had too much wine or are too tired. They know what they’ve seen and now are much more keenly interested in being back with the others who have claimed to see the same thing. Luke tells us, “They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.”

They found the others, who they would travel with on the same road going forward for the rest of their lives. But they now understand their journey differently. They now have the vision to recognize Jesus in the myriad people and ways that Jesus appears. Wesley called God’s work in that third phase of the journey, “Sanctifying Grace,” which is the way we live and work in the world *after* having recognized God as being alive and well and sharing life with us on this earth, from our birth to the present moment.

When John Wesley talks about the “means of grace,” he meant all the moments on the road where we have the means—the opportunity—for God to be revealed as present and already working in our lives. Baptism is such a moment. Sharing a community meal is another, as we are welcomed to the Lord’s table. And there are many, many other moments, both formal and informal, along the way.

There may be a time of first recognition where we remember the day and the hour. That's true for many. But it's not true for many others who, like me, saw the face of God before our conscious memory, perhaps in the first loving glance of our mother on our birth-bloodied bodies.

But, whether we recognize God's face early or late; God is still traveling with us on the road—an act of “prevenient grace,” the presence that we recognize when we baptize an infant and promise, as a congregation, to help that child come to see and recognize the one who has been walking beside them on the road since the day they were born.

And that's the story of how a good Baptist girl came to baptize babies. Amen.