

RCL Easter 5B
 Greg Tallant
 Acts 8.26-40
 1 John 4.7-21

May 10, 2009
 St. Peter's Church, Rome, GA
 Psalm 22.24-30
 John 15.1-8

On page 298 of the Prayer Book are the rubrics, or instructions, about Baptism. (By the way, for those of you who have only worshipped in the age of bulletins, the Prayer Book is the red one. Except when it's the blue one. Or black. Whatever, I digress.)

On page 298, the first sentence about Holy Baptism is this: Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. It seems so simple - It isn't. It seems so safe - It's really not.

Centuries ago we were so scared of death we thought baptism was the way to make us safe. Perhaps now we're so scared of really living that we try to make Water and Spirit seem *only* comforting, safe, and sweet. They're really not.

I'm going to try and describe some of the dangers *and* some of the joys that come from baptism, from inviting the Spirit to pour over your head and run down your neck. But it's hard to talk about a symbol of the Divine, like water, without sounding like the Divine is *only* a symbol. The language can get tricky enough that we forget what is truth and what is symbol. It reminds me of something I read by basketball coach Phil Jackson.

He said that people sometimes told him basketball was a metaphor for life.

He tells his players the opposite is true.

Life, he says, is a metaphor for basketball.

When we talk about the Holy Spirit and the presence of that Spirit in our lives there's almost no way to talk about that without talking metaphorically, without looking at aspects of our lives that are signs of the Spirit's presence:

passion, creativity, love, kindness. John calls it fruit.

But remember that the Spirit is not just another word for passion or creativity. Instead, passion, love, kindness - the fruits of the Spirit -

are all signs that the Divine lives within us, are all symbols of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Spirit is not a metaphor for Life. Life is a metaphor for the Spirit.

So...Water and Spirit.

“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

We try to tame water in our prayers, as if we could tame water or Spirit. In an article on home repair recently, a contractor said that if there were 10 things that could go wrong with a house, 15 of them were related to water. I thought that sounded like a good description of baptism. If you invite Living Water into your life, crazy things can start to happen, and no matter how much we want to control it, Living Water won’t always go where you want.

When we give thanks for the waters of baptism, we talk about the waters at Creation. It’s easy to think of them as peaceful waters, but the Hebrews saw the seas as the symbol of chaos, and feared them. We talk about God parting the Red Sea for the children of Israel as they escaped bondage in Egypt, but try to forget the movie version or the children’s book version, and try to imagine walking along a path while all around you an entire sea crashes against an invisible barrier, inches away from you, angry at this power that has overtaken its rightful sovereignty.

Even the waters of Jesus’ baptism aren’t nearly as safe as we like to think.

Remember the story in Mark, where this crazy street preacher, the cousin that Jesus’ family doesn’t like to talk about, grabs Jesus and sticks him down in that river, maybe holding him down there just a beat too long, before he comes up

and a huge bird takes hold of him, driving him out into the desert.

And all of these are images of water meant to be signs pointing to the Holy Spirit.

Children know that water is a little bit wild – nothing gets them going more than a water hose ... or squirt gun ... or water balloon. And they know that water is a little bit dangerous – nothing quite scares them like that moment when their feet won't touch, when the wave or the current is stronger than they are.

As adults we try to harness and control water – to make it run down the right pipes or down the right embankments, but we always learn that water's nature is to find all the wrong cracks and crevices, to get past the head gasket and ruin the engine, or to seep into the basements or drip through the ceiling.

Water rushes through our bodies and flushes out all the waste,

but sometimes in moments of high stress it ... leaks out,

usually at the worst possible time for our dignity.

The Spirit's effect on us is unpredictable – sometimes wild, sometimes dangerous, never fully controlled, never fully going in the direction we want it to go. Sometimes it's a healthy chaos, but sometimes the effect of inviting the Spirit can leave us warped or disfigured.

We've all seen people who have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives but for whom that experience hasn't gone well.

We see people who are scared of the experience of the Spirit and try to deny it. There was a girl I grew up with – same church, same school, same community – who was delightful and joyful and beautiful, really. Some time early in high school she fell in love with a man she eventually married. I don't know if it was the love that scared her, or if the love became a reason to flee from joy, but she

just shut down. In seemingly a month, she went from age 16 to...something else. She became the Puritan woman she thought her preacher husband wanted and the joy was just...gone.

Other people experience a manifestation of the Spirit and it goes badly in other ways. We all know people who experience God's presence in their lives, who have a Spirit moment, and they become certain that they are the only person only to have had that moment. Their truth becomes the only truth, their zeal the only zeal, their righteousness the only righteousness.

And there are others who experience God's Spirit and mistake it for their own. Their worship of the Spirit somehow becomes their worship of themselves. Spirituality slowly becomes narcissism and then slowly turns into idolatry, the worship of self.

In all of these instances, we become like Jesus' description of the branches that have severed their connection to the true vine – Jesus. Our fear or certainty or narcissism cut us off from the nurturing vine and we bear no fruit. Frequently in those times we don't need God to prune us away. We cut ourselves away and cast ourselves on the fire, burning away all the life-giving water within us until we are dry and dead inside.

But there's another kind of life in the Spirit - sometimes peaceful, sometimes just as wild as the destructive kind, but healthier, more open, more free.

Healthy Spirit life doesn't cut itself off from others – doesn't presume to be completed, doesn't stop growing. Healthy Spirit life is neither controlled by another's expectations nor tries to control other people's lives. Healthy Spirit life loves instead of controls, it stays in relationships while maintaining healthy boundaries of self.

And healthy Spirit life gets crazy every now and then.

The first letter of John this morning says, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

Our baptismal covenant says the same thing, but in different language.

Will you break bread *together*?

Will you repent of your sins against *one another*?

Will you proclaim the good news by word and example *to one another*?

Will you seek and serve Christ in *one another*, and love *one another*?

Will you respect *one another's* dignity, and defend their rights to justice and peace?

The gospel puts it more simply: will you abide in God and allow God to abide in you?

These ideas sound lovely, and they are, but seeking and serving can get you into trouble, into gospel trouble. Respecting those whom no one else will respect can cost you. Repenting of your sins when others want you to just keep quiet can carry a price, though the price is never as high as the price of carrying it around inside you forever.

There are even places where breaking bread together is getting into gospel trouble.

[Later this morning] / [In a few minutes] we'll baptize another person with water and the Spirit into God's church and it will be a happy moment. It'll be sweet and comforting and most of us will grin at some point. But it won't be safe, not in the long term. Inviting the Spirit into someone's life is inviting joy and pain, risk and reward, chaos and peace. There is a wideness in God's mercy, but there's a wildness there, too.

A Song of True Motherhood

Julian of Norwich

God chose to be our mother in all things *
and so made the foundation of his work,
most humbly and most pure, in the Virgin's womb.
God, the perfect wisdom of all, *
arrayed himself in this humble place.
Christ came in our poor flesh *
to share a mother's care.
Our mothers bear us for pain and for death; *
our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.
Christ carried us within him in love and travail, *
until the full time of his passion.
And when all was completed and he had carried us so for joy, *
still all this could not satisfy the power of his wonderful love.
All that we owe is redeemed in truly loving God, *
for the love of Christ works in us;
Christ is the one whom we love.