

Provided

The Rev. Jimmy Abbott
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Proper 11, Year C
Colossians 1:15-28

Open my lips O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Just recently I came across this letter from a distressed father to his cousin. It went something like this:

“Dearest cousin, I had hoped to write you with happier news of my family. Unfortunately, our son is in a bad way. This is shocking to me and his mother, as he had been such a wonderful child. He graduated from the best schools and then entered the military. After a distinguished record in the armed services, he had gotten out and seemed to have a promising career ahead of him in the government. But then something went terribly wrong. He has joined some strange and foreign eastern religious sect. Now he doesn’t want to have anything to do with us because we are people of ‘the world.’ We had thought that our son would marry a nice girl through all the family connections we had for him. But now, he claims that these funny religious people are his true family and that if he marries, *if he marries!*, then it will have to be a girl from these new friends of his. Needless to say, his mother and I are devastated. We simply do not know what to do.”

Huh! So what do you think this strange eastern religious sect is? Maybe the Hare Krishnas, or the Moonies? And when do you think it was written, the 1970s, right? How about the fourth century. Actually, the religion this father is describing is not so foreign after all. This letter was written by a Roman senator about his son’s baptism into the Christian community.¹

¹ See Stanley Hauerwas, “Abortion, Theologically Understood” in *The Hauerwas Reader*, 613.

Jesus' dying and rising was effectual for us. By it, we have been reconciled with God. Baptism is our participation in this dying and rising. All of the sinfulness, the hatred, the malice, and the distance from God was drowned out of us in baptism. Then all of the righteousness, love, compassion, and kinship with God is brought to life in us through baptism. We Christians, we who are part of that strange and foreign eastern sect, stick together because we know this about one another. Our life together only has meaning because we have life in Jesus.

The letter to the Colossians is quite clear about this life of faith together. "Jesus is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." This is the paradoxically wondrous nature of our faith. Jesus, who is the author of salvation, the one in whom all things were made, the one who gives very life itself, is the One who first died. He plunged into the depths of death itself, only to rise again as the head of this body here gathered.

Through this ancient ritual of baptism, Charlotte Ann Tate-Field is about to become the newest member of the household of God, the Body of Christ. In this act, we do not just splash a little water on her tender, young head. No, baptism is not as wimpy as that. Instead, we are figuratively drowning Charlotte. She is going to pass through the waters of baptism and die. Then she will be raised again, she will be reborn out of this water. She dies to her individuality and rises to a corporate life in this church. We, "these funny religious people," are her new family, and Jesus becomes the head of her life.

Now, all of this sounds very well and good. This baptismal theology is echoed in the passage to the Colossians. As one reads this passage, we hear that "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his

cross.” Then we rejoice when we hear that Jesus has reconciled even us through death, so as to present us holy and blameless and irreproachable before God. We understand that our baptism is part of this, that we are cleansed in those waters and reconciled to God. Thank you Colossians, for reinforcing our baptismal theology.

But then we find a biblical monkey-wrench thrown into all of this. The letter to the Colossians says that we will be presented holy, blameless, and irreproachable before God, *provided that* we continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard!

What? Haven't we been “justified by faith alone?” Haven't we all been taught that there is no way to “earn our salvation?” Don't we all know, in our heart of hearts, that we can't possibly ever hope to live a holy and blameless life? And isn't that the point of baptism, that we are cleansed from all of that sin and led into new life? How in the world did that little clause, “*provided that*,” sneak its way into this good news of salvation?

This is the chasm between baptism and the baptismal life. In baptism, we participate in Christ's dying and rising, and are promised the gift of salvation. In the baptismal life, we devote ourselves daily to God and to our fellow Christians in an effort to lead lives that become holy. And just as we were reconciled to God through the work of Jesus Christ in baptism, we are led on the path of the baptismal life by the Holy Spirit. This is a both/and relationship. We need baptism for our salvation, but we also need to work at our holiness. And it is hard work. Living a holy, baptismal life means that we have to pray. It means that we have to worship. It means that we have to love our neighbors as ourselves. These are no easy tasks, rather they are feats approaching godliness. The “*provided that*” in Colossians is the definition and description of our

entire lives as Christians. We know that in baptism we are reconciled with God. But baptism also gives us the lifelong charge to continue securely established and steadfast in the faith.

Charlotte, you are embarking on a wonderful journey. When you pass through these waters, your participation in Jesus' dying and rising will be sealed with oil on your forehead. You can't get out of it now. As you grow and mature in Christ, you will find yourself indelibly and eternally attached to these people, the church, and to its head, Christ himself. The "provided that" will come. Your life of faith and devotion will grow as you grow, and mature as you mature.

The baptismal life isn't easy. Ask around. But trust the Holy Spirit to sustain you, to give you an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, and the knowledge and love of Christ. God provides that.