

The Washing of Regeneration Titus 3:1-7

When we see the same thing for years, it often loses its power to shock or challenge us. We had a whole busload of tourists from Norway stop by on Wednesday morning to take pictures of it. How many of us give it a second thought as we drive down Church Street? Our daily concerns are so much more pressing and urgent, aren't they?

General Parker Hills brought a group of tourists from all over the country into this room last Monday, and they marveled at the beautiful stained glass and plaster work. They were amazed at the engineering that produced such perfect acoustics. To us, this is just the place where we worship. Sure, we appreciate its beauty, but we are more often comforted by its lack of change than we are overwhelmed by its grandeur.

In the same way, we saw five cadets join the church this morning, and four of them received Christian baptism. Since this building was constructed in 1860, how many other earnest young people have stood before this font, making similar promises to follow the Lord Jesus? How many of you can remember bringing your children and your grandchildren to the same place, making the same promises on their behalf? Yes, the patina of tradition has settled on this ritual, and so it would be easy for us to hear the familiar words recited once again, and simply take comfort that, in this world of confusion and constant change, in this denomination where everything seems to be up in the air all of a sudden, there are some things that remain the same.

But if we have taken what we have seen and heard today as simply an exercise in nostalgia, we have missed the point. For joining a church and receiving the covenant sign of baptism are both shockingly countercultural actions.

Now, it is the case that joining a church still remains a test of social respectability in the small-town South. But that is rapidly fading in other places, especially in large urban areas. Baby boomers, along with their children and grandchildren, increasingly reject the need for membership in any kind of organization. Masonic lodges and bowling leagues are losing members right along with most Christian denominations. By joining the church today, Aaron, Cody, Daniel, Jeffrey and Wayne are swimming against a growing tide of American individualism. By joining the church, they are saying that organized groups matter. They are saying that the Church of Jesus Christ matters. And all of us traditionally minded Presbyterians would heartily agree.

But in joining the church, and in receiving the covenant sign of baptism, they have also made statements that would scandalize even us traditional Southern Presbyterians, if those sentiments were expressed in less socially acceptable settings.

Think about it. We traditional Southerners pride ourselves on nothing if not on our respectability. There are certain things that are just not done. There are certain things that are just too tacky to talk about. And the church is the last place that we want to air our dirty laundry.

But all those who come to join the church have to admit what Paul admitted to Titus: that we are not, in fact, respectable. Instead we are nothing more than sinners. But Paul went further. He went into all the tacky details. "We were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another."

No, Paul was doing what we seldom do: he was coming clean about his past, confessing his shortcomings publicly. Paul wasn't putting on his "church face," smiling and pretending that everything is fine. Paul wasn't keeping all his problems and faults carefully hidden from his friends. No, he was open and honest, even with someone below him on the ecclesiastical totem pole, someone he considered his son in the faith.

Today, many young people reject organized religion of all kinds, and the Christian church in particular. And why? Mainly because they think we Christians are a bunch of hypocritical fakes and phonies. But what if they found in the Church, what if they found in our church, a group of people bound not just by a set of traditions, but by a common confession of sin, by a

willingness to admit our problems and to accept others who are willing to do the same thing? If the outside world saw the Church not as an exclusive club for the socially respectable but as a hospital for sick sinners, can we doubt that our numbers would grow?

But in joining the Church, and in presenting themselves for baptism, these young men haven't just admitted that they are sinners. That's shocking enough. No, they have also admitted that there is nothing that they can do, and nothing that they have done to achieve their own salvation. They have admitted that they need a Savior.

Now, that's downright un-American. We Americans pride ourselves on our strength, our capability, and our dependability. We respect those who pull their own weight. We admire action as much as we despise laziness and passivity.

But Paul makes it quite clear that all Christians have been saved "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy." It was precisely when we were helpless, hopeless sinners that God took pity on us. He did this, not because we deserved it, but just because He wanted to be gracious.

Oh, we don't like to hear that. We want to feel good about ourselves because of all the good things we have done, or because of all the bad things we have left undone. But the truth is that none of that, none of the labors of our hands can ever render us acceptable in God's sight. No, Paul clearly says that we are justified by God's grace alone. We inherit all the blessings of eternal life just because God wanted to give them to us.

And that is the amazing truth to which the sacrament of baptism so clearly points. For it simply isn't possible to baptize yourself, is it? Baptism isn't something that we do – it's something that is done to us. It is a sign that we receive, an indication not that we have cleaned ourselves up, but that our sins have been washed away from us – washed away by Someone else, by the water and the blood that came forth from the side of our dying Savior.

And because we have been forgiven, because we have been washed clean, we are in fact heirs of eternal life. The good news is that no Christian needs to fear his eternal destiny. Just as Jesus promised the thief on the cross, "This day, you will be with Me in paradise," we also can know that, when our eyes shall close in death, we shall be welcomed by the One Who judges all people. For on that great and terrible day, the judge of all the earth will also be our Savior.

But the good news is even greater than that. For baptism isn't just a sign of eternal life in the world to come. It's a sign of new birth, new life in this world, today. The good news is that through the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, God has given new eyes, new ears, new hearts, new lives to all of His people. And because of these new lives, we can see the truth for what it is. Because of these new lives we can hear the gospel and respond to it in faith.

And it is because we have been saved in this way and given new life by God's grace alone that we can in fact do all those things we have come to value, those things which Paul enumerates in verses 1 and 2: subjecting ourselves to the authority of the Church, doing all sorts of good works, speaking evil of no one, being peaceable, gentle and humble. The good words that we say, the profitable relationships we have and the works of righteousness that we do are thus not a precondition, not a cause of our salvation, but a result of it. We live the way God wants us to live because God has been first been gracious to sinners like us.

No, it's not the labors of our hands that can make us fit for the presence of God. There's nothing in our hands that we can bring to God that can purchase His pardon. But as Paul tells us, it is according to God's mercy that He saves all who trust in Christ. Let's confess our need of this grace as we sing all the stanzas of Hymn 149 (Rock of Ages).