

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
All Saints'-B; 4 November 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201811031900)

Baptism Inside & Out

In nomine...

I. Intro

One of the things that is most striking to me about the tragedies that keep coming across our national newsfeeds, such as the slaughter last week at the Tree of Life Synagogue, is the spiritual condition of people committing these crimes. They project concentrated anger, hatred and contempt.

What I have noticed in myself and in relationships with others is that when people are hurting inside, we are tempted to manifest that hurt as anger and contempt toward others. “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,” says Jesus.¹ So it is with our actions as well. Our internal realities shape, in very practical ways, our external world.

The bad news is that people often feel powerless to choose what fills their hearts. They let them get filled by voices of drama and outrage and *us vs. them*. The results can be deadly, as they were in Pittsburg last week. They can be tragic, as when a marriage unravels or family members become estranged. They can be suffocating, as when a person finds herself swamped by depression or addiction or hopelessness.

The good news is that we *do* get a choice. We *do* get to choose with what to fill our own heart. Our encounter with the world is very much shaped by the attitudes we cultivate in our hearts. In a real sense, the world is what we make of it. That’s the kind of choice baptism is all about. That’s what our Gospel is about today, too.

¹ Mt 12.34 NIV

II. Jesus and Lazarus

In our Gospel account today, we read of Jesus' encounter with Martha, Mary, and the recently deceased Lazarus. The back story is that Jesus knew Lazarus was going to die; he had heard about it days before, but he delayed going down to see Lazarus. Jesus waited, on purpose, until Lazarus was good and dead. It's a strange story. It doesn't put Jesus in the best of light. Martha and Mary hear their friends asking, *Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?* We hear that question and we have to admit: they have a good point!

Mary and Martha were struggling with a world in which the death of their brother was overwhelming and final. But Jesus invited them to a new understanding of reality, a reality whose most essential feature is the certainty of God's love for them.

Jesus showed his friends that death is no hinderance to his love and care for them. Jesus' attachment to his friends would not be stopped by any obstacle – not Lazarus's death, not Mary's reproach, not even Martha's faltering belief. Jesus invited Lazarus to come out of the tomb, Mary to come out of her bitterness, and Martha to come out of her doubt. His love for them was stronger than any barrier they could throw up. Jesus' love for his friends is complete, perfect, and unconditional.

III. Baptism

This is exactly the message of baptism. When we baptize an adult or a child, we are inducting them into a new understanding of reality, telling them something about their own relationship with Jesus.

For parents, baptism and the choices it represents are a gift, given in hopes that a child might approach life with a strong inner belief in her belovedness, and thus the capacity to project the love of God into the world around her. We make *many* choices for our children's benefit: that they should take baths and brush their teeth and wear clean underwear. We teach them the basics of courtesy and how to think of the welfare of others. We teach them to exercise discipline and require them to finish their homework before bingeing on Netflix or video games. We make lots of choices for our children that they may not understand or agree with at the time, but whose benefits will bear lifelong fruit. We shape their inner worlds so that their outer worlds might be better places to live.

Baptism, belonging to a church community, guidance in living out our Baptismal Covenant, is one of the best gifts you could give your children. You are planting seeds, creating habits and commitments that will serve your children well. You are shaping their inner lives, so that their outer lives may reap the fruits of that hard work. These seeds of love are the best chance your child has of building a life that issues forth in a harvest of beauty, compassion, and joy.

IV. Love and Invitation

Our outer lives are shaped by our inner lives. If we know we are loved, that makes a profound difference in how we are able to live. There are so many things that interfere with that conviction of our own lovableness. There are tragedies, disappointments, and struggles in every life. There are things that make us ask, “Why does God let this happen?”

I wish I had an answer for you!

There’s often not a good answer to be had for “why.” Instead there’s the message Jesus brought to Mary and Martha and Lazarus. It is the same message Jesus brings to us. God weeps with us when we encounter evil in the world. And nothing that we can ever think or do or say is an obstacle to God’s love for us. The struggles we encounter in life do not define us: they are not our primary identity. What is most important about you and me and every human being is that we are loved by our Creator with a love that is complete, perfect, and unconditional. This is the story that can shape our lives as we hold it in our hearts.

This morning we commit these children to the care and love of *that* God. The commitment we make is not changing God’s perspective on these children. God already loves them! The commitment we make is changing our perspective on our responsibility to these children. We acknowledge they are God’s possession, and we are responsible to God to raise them up to know that they are loved: completely, perfectly, and unconditionally.

Today we tell these children the story of God’s love for them. We are offering to them an inner story that will have potential to shape their external reality in important and life-giving ways.

That is the story that will enable them, and us, to face whatever comes our way with hope, courage, and confidence. That is the story that enables us to love.

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