

*Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Pentecost on the occasion of a Baptism, Year C*  
*10 July 2022*

*St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit*  
*Amos 7:7-17; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37*

Among the big “Life Questions,” is the question: “Who am I?” To answer that, though, we’ll need to answer a prior question, that is: “Of what story do I find myself a part?” It is basic to our nature to desire to know *who* we are and to want to know *how* to live. And knowing both of these things means being able to know what story my life is telling.

My generation has been raised to believe that we create ourselves *ex nihilo* — *out of nothing*. That means that we have been taught, if I am going to be free and happy, I must write a life-story for myself.

It is because of this idea that some people—including some Christians—think we should not do what we are going to do today: to administer the sacrament of baptism to a child. After all, Sophie has not even begun to make herself up yet.

You might have begun to see why the way my generation has defined freedom and self-determination is so problematic: not only does it put truth and freedom against one another, the modern myth of self-creation promises a freedom it cannot actually deliver. And it comes at the cost of a deep loneliness, because a story that is only about me is not one that can be shared.

In the waters of baptism we are immersed into a story *not* of our own devising. A true one. Where we come to belong, not fundamentally to ourselves, but to the Lord of history. Today, Sophie will be baptized into God’s story and, therefore, the first words that will be uttered *over* her and *for* her is the word of grace. That’s how she enters it. This, my friends, is the best thing that can happen to any of us. For, by receiving Christ, we truly find ourselves, because it was for life *with* him that we were made. So, by finding ourselves in God’s story we find that we can be free, not to make ourselves up, but to receive life *as it is given* as a gift, one shared with others.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he greets the Christians at Colossae as “brothers and sisters in Christ.” At first glance, this seems innocuous. Like asking someone “How they are doing” on the street; no intimacy implied. But, the Colossians have discovered that they have been made “brothers and sisters” through the work of Christ. Because in baptism we are made to share in Christ’s very own Sonship, we are made with him sons and daughters of God. That’s what makes us, in the Church, “brothers and sisters” of one another in the “family of faith.” God, in Christ, has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between us and God and made us One in him. So: intimacy implied. A great, divine-human intimacy that boasts of what the Lord has wrought through his Cross.

So while, the Granville family is already a part of this community, Sophie will be received as a daughter, not only of Anthony and Meagan, but of the Lord, and receive from him who she was made to be: a child of God.

To be “in Christ” means then to not firstly belong to *oneself*, but to belong to Christ. We are not left meandering in the wilds of self-creation; rather, the Lord, the Good Shepherd, calls us by name, and into the pastures of his Kingdom. The old humanity, that of Adam, destined to the death of judgement, is put away in the water, as we rise, we come to share in that new humanity, forged by Christ’s resurrected life. In this sense, for being brothers and sisters we have been “re-located” as it were, into the Kingdom of God’s Son, which carries with it a total reorientation of our lives, one consistent with this renewed nature and identity. (Like I said, once I **know the story** of which I am a part, I can begin to discern where I am to go).

You might worry that what I’m saying suggests that being a Christian negates a person’s originality and uniqueness. But have no fear, wary individualists! In this baptism our individuality is not destroyed; rather, it is perfected. When Jesus came in the flesh, he did not destroy that humanity he assumed but restored it by the grace of his being. Like the bush before Moses, though it was illumined, it remained unburned (Ex 3:2); and, so, too, are the saints “in light,” as Paul calls us, not scorched but transfigured in the resurrected life of God’s Son. This is the baptism that leads from death to life, and in this new life, this new life “in Christ,” we do discover *most* truly and fully what is *our* life. Our being is a gift to receive, not one we have to make up. Therefore, the self we receive in baptism is that which can be genuinely called that—*life*— one re-oriented toward its Maker, who has loved it to the end, in Jesus Christ.

That means that in these waters only that which makes us *lesser* than who we were created to be is destroyed. We are like the man beaten and laid in a gutter that only the Samaritan goes to help. Our personhood encounters Christ as the only power by which we are brought up and healed in our very being, that is, restored to his image and likeness. Our face, then, is to resemble the Lord’s; we are, indeed, meant to be gods (Gen 1:27; Ps 82:6; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 4:24; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3)! We were made to be like Christ, the perfect image of the Father.

That’s why Paul’s encouragement at the beginning of Colossians assumes that the knowledge of him and the bearing of fruit goes hand-in-hand. You might notice that Paul doesn’t *argue* this point; he assumes it to be a connection his baptized hearers would appreciate and so works in his letter as an affirmation. Paul explains that what it looks like to “truly [have] comprehended the grace of God” is to bear the fruits of the Spirit—faith, hope, and love—and so live a life that looks like this new identity. To look like Jesus.

In baptism, we receive the Spirit as a kind of pledge that we will receive all that Christ has promised us. But, the Spirit also, having turned the human heart toward God in baptism, then begins to work in our lives, to help us live lives consistent with this new baptismal identity. This isn’t merely a moralistic program; for, *we* are the very fruit of Christ’s resurrection. In baptism, we are made part of the Church, the family of faith; and as such, that means that all of you here, by virtue of your baptism, are obliged to help the Granville family raise Sophie to do just that: to “grow in the knowledge of God” and to bear the fruit of faith, hope, and love in her life. By this she will shine with the light of the Gospel and grow to bear witness to that God who came to rescue all “from the power of darkness” and to transfer us to the “kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins,” as Paul says.

The Christian story then leads from forgiveness to the fruits of the Spirit, that is, from death to life. That journey, like I said, is not done alone; we are, after all, “brothers and sisters,” One Body in Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is for our good, but also for the building up of one another, that is, the building of the Church by whose works we bear witness to the power of the Gospel in the world. This is what the Bible means by “grow” up, and what makes us different from the way our culture teaches it. Though we were once children, Scripture says, we learn to put off childish things (1 Cor 13) by being filled with spiritual wisdom and the knowledge of God’s will by which we are “strengthened” to “bear fruit” for the Kingdom.

Among such “fruits” or “works” that Paul lists as evidence of the Spirit’s presence is “joy.” It is this gift of joy by which God affirms his presence within us amidst life’s confusion and heartache. This, too, is indicative of the power of God to transform a life: to know joy, exactly because Christ has found us and rooted us in himself. That is the promise of the story of the Gospel. The Spirit does not come to make us merely tools in a divine purpose alien to our being; rather, he comes to us to show us personally to our created and eternal end and so, happiness, in the Lord.

This story is the story of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one that leads for those who believe from sin and death to love and life. And, in just a few moments, Sophie will be given a role alongside us in God’s story of redemption. She will be made a witness with us even in her infancy to God’s Kingdom. Exactly because that Kingdom comes to her as it does to all of us: as pure grace.

God isn’t interested in marketing to you. He isn’t interested in any *quid pro quo*. Salvation comes to us as the lavish gift of God. While we were still sinners, the Father sent his Only Son. And he loved us to the end.

We live in God’s world and God’s story. And, because we are part of God’s good creation, that means that we are not free to make up our own stories; and thanks be to God for that. For, only in this way do we come to realize that everything we have and *are* comes as the gift of God. That means that freedom can only be found where life is given, rather than made. We are destined for life in Christ and to bear witness to His Kingdom, not merely to be a collection of self-assembled desires and drives without end. Therefore, you are not alone exactly because you are not your own; for, you, in your baptism, come to belong to the Lord.

This is the best story in the world and we in the Church have an obligation to tell the world about it. The greatest gift, it turns out, is not to be made, but begotten; a begotten son and daughter of the Most High. For this reason the Church reminds us of this gift all the time. In your baptism, you are told that you are not your own. You are not your own, we are told in the Eucharist. And when our bodies are returned to the ground, we are not merely returned to the earth, but returned to our Maker.

So it all comes down to this. Consider today’s Gospel. When the man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus’ response reveals that the man doesn’t quite know what he is asking for. He seems to be asking the Lord how he might simply add more days to his life, extend his own story with a bit of divine currency. Though he asks, Jesus, “Teacher, what must I

do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus discerns another: "Lord, how do I become myself?" The answer Jesus gives his disciples is this: "*Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.*" (Lk 17:33).

For, we have been made for the Lord, to live with him, both now and forever.

So, let us abandon ourselves into his hands, and so *truly* find ourselves in a story of perfect love.

Amen.