



## *“Remember Who You Are”*

Mark 1:9-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Romans 6:1-4

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**June 14, 2009**

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Just before dawn in Rome as the last revelers wandered home and the first street vendors emerged onto the streets of Rome, muffled sounds came from behind the front doors of the large house. It sounded like singing or chanting, perhaps the last sounds of a party winding down.

But behind those locked doors, safe from the prying eyes and ears of suspicious neighbors and civic officials, it was actually the beginning of a feast. A group of Christians gathered quietly, almost secretly for a festival. Christianity was not legal in the second century. Rome kept a tight leash on the religions of the Empire. No religious practice was allowed that might subvert primary allegiance to the Empire – and Christianity refused to pledge that allegiance.

It was Easter morning, the central festival of the Christian movement from the earliest days. But before the Easter service began, an important Easter ritual must happen first. Back then, all Christian baptisms took place on Easter morning as a sign of the new life God sent into the world on resurrection Sunday.

Andronicus, Olympas, and their twin daughters Tryphena and Tryphosa, candidates for baptism, waited nervously. They'd waited a long time for this day. The custom was to have three years of instruction and guidance before converts to the faith were admitted into membership of the church. Christianity was a radically different way of life, and it took time to live your way into this new way of moral and ethical living. Andronicus, Olympas, Tryphena, and Tryphosa learned the story of God's salvation in the Bible and they listened carefully to the story of Jesus and all the stories about him. They practiced their faith, praying, serving, giving, and worshipping.

Toward the end of the three years, they were examined one last time. The standards were high. They told how they'd served the poor, visited the sick, showed mercy to the unfortunate, and helped the poor. The real question: were they truly converted to this new way of living?

On Friday before Easter, each member of the family took a ritual bath, a sign of the inner cleansing that accompanies faith in Christ. The old life was past; a new life was beginning. On Saturday, baptismal candidates fasted until the Easter Feast. That night they joined the congregation in an all night vigil, awaiting Easter dawn, baptism, and Easter Eucharist. The vigil ritual is nearly as old as the church: readings, prayer, silence, instruction, and waiting for the dawn.

As the first roosters began to crow, it was time. The elders of the church along with deacons and deaconesses led the candidates for baptism to a room in the house with a pool – the Romans had running water and the ritual specified the water needed to be

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running. The candidates for baptism undressed – Romans didn't view nudity as shameful or embarrassing. The old clothes, as signs of the old life, would be left on the floor. New clothes awaited them on the other side of baptism.

The children were baptized first followed by the men, then the women. When Andronicus was escorted into the pool by a deacon, the elder met him in the water, anointed him with oil, and asked, "Andronicus, do you believe in almighty God?"

Andronicus answered in familiar words we know as the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." The elder dipped Andronicus under the water, raised him and asked, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

"I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was dead and buried. On the third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and from there will come to judge the living and the dead." Again, Andronicus went under the water and came up.

"Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" the elder asked.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." A third time the elder put Andronicus under the water and raised him up again.

Each candidate was asked the same questions and went under the water three times. Then they were anointed with oil again, dried themselves off and put on their white Easter baptismal clothes. Their preparation was finished. They were part of a new life in a new community.

Finally, the bishop of the congregation prayed over them all.

Lord God, you who have made these worthy of the removal of sins through the bath of regeneration, grant to them your grace, that they might serve you according to your will, for to you is the glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church, now and throughout the ages of the ages. Amen.

The new baptismal class was taken into the large room where the rest of the congregation waited. Now, for the first time, they each received the kiss of peace, joined in the congregational prayers, and participated in the Eucharist. "As long as I live," Olympas said to Andronicus, "I will never forget this day. Thanks be to God." All Andronicus could say was, "Amen."

I didn't make that story up entirely. Hippolytus, an elder in the Church at Rome in the late first and early second centuries, wrote a summary of the practices of the early church in a book titled *Apostolic Traditions*. I followed his account of a baptismal service. I used the names Andronicus, Olympas, Tryphosa, and Tryphena which are found in Romans 16 in a list of some of the members of the Church at Rome a century earlier.

My point is not to point out how different baptism was back then nor how high the standard was for church membership. I want you to notice how significant, what a very big deal, baptism was back in the beginning. It was a high priority in the church accompanied by very high standards and always a memorable experience for all.

For centuries, baptism held that high place in the life of the church. Many of you, no doubt, have visited the famous Baptistery of St. John in Florence, Italy. It is perhaps the oldest building in Florence and stands in the piazza in front of the even more famous Duomo (Cathedral) of Florence.

The baptistry is an eight-sided structure with exquisite bronze doors Michelangelo said are "the gates of heaven." Each door pictures biblical scenes. The north door, by Ghiberti is

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the most famous of them all. For better than 1500 years, every Florentine was baptized in that building, including Dante and the Medicis.

Behind the doors of the baptistry lies another world. The noise and bustle of the piazza are shut out. Dim light filters in from small, high windows. The walls are marble inlaid with white and green designs. The mosaic floor is a maze of geometric patterns. The beauty of the room is breathtaking.

The room is crowned by a domed mosaic ceiling. In the center of the dome is Christ the Lord surrounded by choirs of angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and the saints of the ages. Biblical stories surround the heavenly host. All the figures in the mosaic are peering down into the baptistry watching the drama on earth. Here, in this place, participants step out of time and into eternity. It reminds us that eternity is invested in time and participates in holy moments like baptism – your baptism!

Several years ago I led a small group of people on a tour of Italy. At the baptistry of St. John I gave a lecture that emphasized that all of heaven leans over to watch the baptism of each of us. Our Italian guide, Daniella, was struck by the moment. She'd been baptized in that room but dropped out of religious practice as an adult. With wide eyes she told me she had no idea that her baptism was so significant and that she would have to think about her faith anew.

Her experience is not rare. The power and significance of baptism is easily buried under centuries of tradition and the additions of culture to faith. Properly understood, baptism is a larger than life event even though it occurs in time and space.

Baptism is more than a rite of passage, a sentimental ritual that features babies, or some cultural marker that declares us “officially” Christians.

Baptism is all that but much more than something we do or something we get done for others. Too easily our attention is diverted to the one being baptized or to the ritual itself. In some circles baptism is a church achievement – the number of baptisms marking the degree of success.

Baptism is a sign and like all signs it points away from itself to something – someone – else. Baptism points at God and what God does, not at us and what we do. In baptism God reaches out to us through common, ordinary stuff, water, an element with primal meaning and power, and in the water God says something.

Remember Jesus' baptism? We talk about it every January on Baptism of our Lord Sunday. When Jesus came up from the water, he heard a voice saying, “You are my dearly loved child.” God speaks the same words every baptism, every time.

God wants us to know by baptism that we are part of something far beyond ourselves. We belong to God and to God's people. It's a matter of identity.

There's more to that identity than meets the eye. Our culture suggests we have a variety of identities. We're told we're sexual beings, bodies with certain rights and privileges. We're also told we are rational beings, minds with the capacity for independent and autonomous decision-making. We are surrounded by signals that tell us we are primarily consuming beings. We are what we own, wear, and surround ourselves with. That is accompanied by the suggestion that we are all about being successful beings. We gain rank and privileges based on our degree of achievement in preferred lines of work.

Baptism doesn't deny any of that. What baptism proclaims is that we're more than all that. Baptism declares that God had prior claim on us and that our primary identity is that we belong to God – not to ourselves or this world. God claims our ultimate allegiance. The baptized belong to an alternative people bound together by covenantal love that forms our souls and creates a community that prefers to make peace not war, for example.

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And so, two thousand years ago, St. Peter wrote from Rome to a group of Christians in Asia to remind them, "Remember who you are."

"You are," he writes, "chosen people, not some random gathering. You are a royal household, no mere common humanity. You are a holy nation, a people within a people marked by God. You are God's own people." So remember who you are.

Peter knew something about confused identity. He knew all about the contradictory character of human nature. He experienced the ambiguity of character that created soaring achievement and, at the same time, dreadful moral failure. Within days Peter went from the inspired confessor of Jesus Christ to a sniveling coward who denied he ever met Jesus and ran like a scared rabbit into the safety of the night.

We share that contradictory nature. Cultures and nations demonstrate the same soaring achievement accompanied by dismal flaws. What other nation has produced freedom, democracy, opportunity and progress like America? And yet, all that is built on land taken from others, achieved in part out of the labor of slaves, a people haunted by the specter of racism and class divisions. Like all nations we find it easy to act with destructive arrogance in the family of nations. And yet.....

Peter knew all that, and he knew something else. After his great failure, denying Christ three times in front of a charcoal fire, Jesus invited Peter to breakfast at a charcoal fire. Three times he asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" Three times Peter answered, "You know I love you." Three times Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep. Take care of my people."

At that moment of astonishing grace, Peter experienced what we all realize in our better moments: God knows what we are, contradictory and ambiguous beings; and yet, God also knows what we can be, children of eternity. And God invests in building eternity in us all.

At baptism we passively receive the sign of that gracious and divine commitment. We receive a gift we can never earn and will never deserve. We contribute nothing to God's grace, and we do nothing to achieve it. God just gives the gift of salvation to all who receive.

At baptism, God says, "I know who you are! You belong to me. Now remember who you are and never forget what you can be." Never forget.

Amen.

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