Words To Build of Life On: The Water (Baptism)

“Finitum Capax Infiniti.” That’s Latin. It translates “The finite is capable of the infinite.” That is why baptism is so wonderful. Our infinite God attaches Himself and His promise of grace to something so simple and finite as water. But, then again, God has so often demonstrated His affinity for the finite. He showed up in a shrubbery to Moses. He showed up as a dove at Jesus’ baptism. He showed up on a donkey heading in to Jerusalem. The grand example is God showing up in human flesh as a baby in Bethlehem. And God shows up and does His grace thing through finite and simple means like baptism, thus making baptism a firm foundation upon which we can build our life.

The Greek word for baptism is baptizw. This really is a simple word with a simple meaning. It simply means to wash with water. People would baptizw their hands before dinner and baptizw their dishes after dinner. Yet Jesus gives this simple word, this simple water, eternal and infinite significance. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18- 20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

There is Old Testament precedence for the delivering property of water. If you recall, God delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt by parting the waters of the Red Sea. In a similar way God delivers His children from bondage to sin, death, and the devil with the waters of holy baptism. We then can build our life upon such deliverance. In 2 Kings we are told of the story of Naaman, a Syrian commander, who goes to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. Expecting some extravagant display of magic he becomes somewhat disappointed when Elisha tells him to simply wash in the waters of the Jordan River. But, with that simple washing in that simple water God healed Naaman. In a similar way God uses the simple water of baptism to wash us clean of our sin with His powerful promise of grace.

God’s powerful promise of grace resides in God’s powerful Word. God’s powerful promise of grace is given to us through what we call the means of grace. The means of grace include God’s Word (the Bible) and the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That’s how God gets His grace, His promise of forgiveness, to us – through Word and Sacrament. Sometimes the sacraments are called the visible Word, because they include things we can see and touch like water, bread, and wine. In fact it is the Word of God attached to these visible elements which gives them the oomph of grace. Otherwise it is just simple water and simple bread and simple wine. But, with God’s Word we have vehicles which convey to us the promise of forgiveness and salvation.

That is what baptism does for us. It conveys to us the promise of forgiveness and salvation. And it doesn’t matter how much water is used. What is commanded is the use of water and the Word. What is not commanded is the mode of baptism. So you can sprinkle, dip, or dunk. Whereas dunking (or immersion) nicely illustrates Paul’s notion that in baptism we are buried with Christ in His death and raised with Christ in new life, we can take comfort in the fact that when it comes to the mode of baptism, a little dab will do ya!

Baptism connects us to what Christ did on the cross. What Christ accomplished on the cross was for the benefit of all humanity. But, we get those benefits personally in our baptism. We get a new identity personally in our baptism because we get Christ’s identity in our baptism. Celebrate this new identity. Build your life upon this identity.

We certainly don’t want to celebrate our old identity. What did that look like? Well Paul describes that old identity with such words as foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved, malicious, envious, and hating. We were wicked witch of the westish.

We were born that way. We were born spiritually dead. And apart from Christ we would remain spiritually dead. We need to get a life – a new life. This new life comes entirely from Christ. Through baptism God makes us alive in Christ because in baptism God connects us with Christ – both his life and His death.

We’re always talking about how our life is tied into Christ’s life. Well, that’s true. But, so is the fact that our death is tied into Christ’s death. As surely as Christ died on the cross our old sinful self died. Here is what Paul said in Romans 6 “We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his… if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” So there’s a death taking place in our baptism – the death of our old self.

If we die with Christ then we will live with Christ. If/then – that’s called a conditional. And according to the rules of formal logic the only time a conditional statement is false is if the antecedent is true and the consequent is false – if the if part is true and the then part is false. But, the then part, the live with Christ part is not false. Paul uses another conditional in 1 Corinthians. He says if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised. So, the only way that would be false- the only way the dead are not raised is false - is if Christ has not been raised. Paul continues, “But in fact Christ has been raised.” So, we too will be raised, because if we die with Christ (which we did in our baptism) then we will live with Christ – now in faith and forever in heaven.

Christ’s righteousness defines us. We get His identity. So, if you’re struggling with your own identity go back to your baptism. There you put on Christ. And that’s all God the Father sees in you. You know what people wear sometimes defines who they are. For example we have yuppies, preppies, rebels, and suits. But we wear Christ. Now wear Him in such a way that people can see him on you and in you.

In our baptism God called us by name and claimed us to be His own. In baptism we don’t claim God. He claims us. In baptism we don’t reach God. He reaches us. In baptism we don’t go to God. He comes to us. And now God calls us as His disciples to use baptism as a means to reach others with His grace. This is what baptized Christians do. They connect, grow and share. And in so doing the Kingdom of God is extended on earth. How exciting! God actually uses us. He uses you make disciples of all nations. That is my encouragement to you today.