

Dead to Sin, Alive to God

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Romans 6:1-11; Matthew 10:32-39

The most memorable baptism I ever saw was at my home church in Greensboro in the early 60s. It was the baptism of a young African woman, a recent immigrant, whose command of both English and the Christian faith was limited. But having seen the love of Christ lived out in some members of that church, she longed to know and serve their Lord. So this African woman came forward one Sunday to present herself as a candidate for baptism. And to the credit of those blue-collar Baptists where I grew up, they received her as a sister-in-Christ, even though nerves were frayed and tempers short over the sit ins going on downtown at Woolworth's.

Naturally, her baptism was memorable, since she was the first person of color to be baptized in that church. But there is another reason, I will never forget the beauty of her glistening black skin as the pastor raised her from the water. And that is because when she came up from that watery grave, she let loose a blood-curdling scream.

The woman was obviously shaken, trembling with fear. We all waited in shock as the pastor spoke with her. After a few moments of hushed conversation, she grew calm and he helped her out of the baptistry. Then the pastor turned to the congregation and explained what had happened.

It seems given the girl's broken English, she understood "dying with Christ" in baptism to mean a literal, rather than symbolic death. Thus, when she was lowered into the water, she fully expected to *die* before being raised to walk in "newness of life." Imagine being willing to go through with baptism, thinking it meant *that*.

But maybe that young woman grasped more about baptism than any of us knew. Because coming out of the baptismal waters with a guttural scream makes perfect sense if baptism is not "just a symbol" but an actual experience of Christ reaching down and pulling you from the clutches of a tomb where you've spent much too long.

When Baptists and other Bible-centric believers say that baptism, like the Lord's Supper, is just a symbol, they mean it is a ritual that points to a deeper spiritual truth. But calling baptism "just a symbol" is like calling your first kiss "just a kiss." No, having one's body, one's being, fully embraced by the baptismal waters is an experience that deeply imprints a person with both the love and claim of God. Such a Spirit-saturated experience that brings God near is what the church rightly calls, a sacrament.

No, the language Paul uses in Romans 6 hardly suggests a quaint, dainty ritual: "Buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk with him in newness of life." *Buried* is a heart-stopping word. It brings to mind standing by an open grave, cheeks wet with tears, just before mama or daddy or granddaddy or someone equally precious is lowered into the ground. The terrible finality of that loss can bring a shudder, even decades later. Who wants to be buried, even with *Christ?!*

But what if what you are burying, is not the new life you long to live, but the old life you want to let go. What if what you are burying is not the promise of your God-breathed glory but the shackles of a sin-choked shame? What if what you are burying is not you at your best but you at your worst?

Years ago, a hard-driving, Harley-riding, recovering alcoholic fell for a pretty young widow at my church. All her friends told her to run from him, as fast as she could, but she saw something

in this gentleman others did not. So this woman's suitor started attending worship with her and in time, Sunday School and other functions until *her* church became *his* church. His gruff, crusty demeanor didn't change but his heart softened as he fell not just for the widow, but also for her Lord.

I'll never forget what he said when he came up, sopping wet, from the baptismal waters. "I left a lot of stuff in that water," he whispered. "Be sure you drain it."

"All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus," Paul writes, "were baptized into his death." To be baptized into Christ's death means you leave your sins in the water. To be baptized into Christ's death means you nail your sins to his cross. To be baptized into Christ's death means you ask in faith and longing that the love and forgiveness that flowed from his cross, reach all the way to you.

And incidentally, there is no mode of baptism that makes this point so emphatically as believer's baptism by immersion. Granted, there are good reasons infant baptism emerged in the post-New Testament period. And infant baptism as practiced in the larger Christian church makes an important witness to the grace of God that precedes any choice or action on our part.

But those ornery Baptists, who insisted at the time of the Reformation on reclaiming the New Testament practice of believer's baptism by immersion, were on to something. Namely, that if indeed, baptism is not just a symbol, but an experience, then going whole hog under the water with Jesus has the power to change you in a way that a merely symbolic sprinkling or pouring does not. It gives you the chance to take whatever particular sin or shame ails you, and *leave it in the water*.

And yet, being buried with Christ in baptism is but the first of two movements. The second is "being raised to walk with him in newness of life!" This reference to "newness of life" speaks to the accusation that prompted Paul to write the sixth chapter of Romans in the first place.

According to Paul's detractors, his emphasis on salvation by grace alone would create morally lax

believers. In words dripping with sarcasm, they suggested, "If we can ditch God's law for God's grace then let's sin all the more that grace may abound!"

Hearing this, Paul exploded with indignation: "How can we who died to sin, go on living in it?" No, to be raised with Christ means that his life is now in you, setting in motion a transformation that makes us more like Jesus, not less: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

There's a revealing truth nestled in that word, *united*. It comes from a Greek root meaning "planted with." To be *planted with* Christ in baptism means you are putting down roots in his truth, his grace, his life, his love. And when you do that, as you do that, the possibility of a new person gains a footing and begins to unfold and flowers. As Jesus himself draws on the metaphor, "I am the vine; you are the branches: without me, you can do nothing. Until my life starts flowing through your life, you can never be the person you want to be, let alone the person God wants you to be."

In the mines of North Africa, one can still see messages scribbled by 2nd and 3rd century believers. Those Christians were sentenced to labor until death in those dank, dark mines because they confessed Christ rather than Caesar as lord. Branded on the brow with a hot iron, one eye gouged out and chained so they could not stand upright, they faced a slow, grueling death.

Yet the inscription they most often managed to etch on the walls of those caves were the words, "Vita, Vita, Vita!" Even the savagery and ruin of their circumstances could not silence the triumphant confession, that Jesus Christ is lord of *life, Life, LIFE!*

No matter in what dark, dank dungeon you have languished, far too long, there is a life force yearning to set you free. This life force is the face of God's love for you; this life force is the presence of God's grace for you; this life force is the promise of God's power for you in the crucified and risen one, Jesus Christ. Once you invite Jesus into your life in a vital, personal way, you are no longer alone in the struggle to change. For the same power that raised him from his tomb, can raise you from yours.

“Buried with Christ in baptism, raised with him to walk in newness of life!”

Granted, it takes time. Don’t get in a hurry. Be patient with yourself *and* with him. Baptism isn’t magic. There are still hard choices to make, hard roads to walk, and hard work to do. As Jesus warns in Matthew’s gospel, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

In other words, following Jesus requires some cutting up and cutting loose, some leaving behind and letting go. You have to keep choosing your baptism. You have to keep crucifying--giving up--the old you without Christ for the sake of the new you with Christ at the center.

But as you keep choosing and trying and growing, a profound mystery unfolds. You become a little more like Jesus each time you crane your neck to see him, creep forward to follow him, and bow your back to stand with him. Because every time you do, Jesus shows up to take what little you have to offer and make it sufficient in his hands. As Alexander Maclaren, a great Baptist preacher of another age, said it, “If Christ offers you his cross, take it. He always carries the heavy end himself.”

Some years ago at a church I was serving, a Sunday School teacher overheard a conversation she shared with me. The conversation was prompted by the baptism of a little boy in the class.

“Why didn’t they choose me?” asked one child with a hint of wounded pride.

“Oh, they don’t *choose you*,” the new Christian explained. “You *choose yourself*.”

That’s a good way of describing the difference in believers’ baptism and infant baptism. In believer’s baptism, “They don’t choose *you*. You choose *yourself*.”

But after this high and holy moment, the conversation took a decidedly different turn. This veteran of the baptismal waters took to giving the inside scoop on this mysterious ritual. “They give you this really neat white gown to put on,” he explained, “and you take off all your clothes.”

At that, the eyes of the other children grew wide.

“But don’t worry,” he hastened to add “you get to keep your underwear on!”

Yes, believer’s baptism by immersion is an awkward, inconvenient, and even embarrassing ritual. It was meant to be. Because baptism is far more than “just a symbol.” It is also an experience of having the new you wrested from the clutches of sin and death by the power of Christ’s resurrection. And being buried in a watery grave before bursting free is a messy business. But from John the Baptist and Jesus in the Jordan, to Chase and Allison in the baptistry today, there’s no more powerful way to choose yourself. And with Christ’s help, to start becoming the person you were always meant to be.

A brother pastor, Mel Williams--quoting Eric Berne--says there are only three important words in the English language: “Yes,” “No,” and “Wow.”

In baptism we say “No” to a life without Christ, “Yes” to a life with Christ at the center, and “Wow” to the grace and goodness of God that make it all possible.

Who wouldn’t want to choose *that* and in choosing that, choose yourself?

O holy Christ, thank you for inviting us to be buried with you in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life. Hear our “No” to a life without you, our “Yes” to a new life with you at the center, and our “Wow” to all that is yet to be. In your name we ask it of our loving heavenly Abba. Amen.

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