

Just as I Am - Luther's Catechism on Holy Baptism

Slide: Sacrament of Baptism - Beloved By God

A couple years ago, I went to the 50th wedding anniversary of a very dear couple, whereupon the woman celebrating the anniversary revealed the secret of her long and happy marriage. She said, "On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook."

I can't remember, who it was, but one of their guests asked her what some of the faults she chose to overlook were. "To tell you the truth," she replied, "I never did get around to making that list. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten!'"

If anything, that was the success of their marriage. They were able to overlook many of their foibles and weaknesses. They accepted each other just as they were, even though that was no doubt difficult to do on occasion. Obviously, marriage isn't as simple as I just described, but this couple seemed to have a system, a way of learning to accept each other, warts and all.

Today we continue our look into the most important teaching points of Luther's Small Catechism by dipping our toes into the gift of Holy Baptism for a bit. I think there is a major misconception about Baptism that gets tossed around by people, that misconception being that the most important aspect of this amazing Sacrament is that it is all about the forgiveness of sins.

Now, don't get me wrong. The forgiveness of sins IS the central part of Holy Baptism, and if you were to open the Small Catechism right now in the red hymnal, you would probably agree that it *is* the key part.

Slide: Open the ELW

In fact, let's do that right now and have a nice review of the Small Catechism together. Open your red hymnal in the back to p.1165. Please refer to the Roman number II. I will read the part that is italicized. You read the regular bold type with me.

What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?

It brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.

Now, skip down to Roman numeral IV...What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?

It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written?

St. Paul says in Romans 6, "We have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Slide: The Body of Christ

Now, let me posit this in a different way in common language by retranslating Luther's meaning for today. In his Large Catechism, which was also a very important teaching book, Luther saw baptism as the sacrament "through which we are first and foremost received into a beloved Christian community, where God's gracious and unconditional love is given to ALL. We call this community the church, the Body of Christ, the community of God that not only serves God in the world, but supports and lifts each other up in faith and in the way of forgiveness. That is why we celebrate infant baptism (although any age person may be baptized) and why a baptism is always in in and among the community of faith, the Body of Christ. We do not celebrate private baptisms because baptism is not solely a gift of individual salvation but of entering into the Body of Christ, the Church. AND, this places the focus, especially of infant baptism, upon God's action and love for us, rather than our individual action or choice to be baptized.

Slide: Newborn

Think about this. “An infant has served on no committees, has done no great work, and is helpless, needy, dependent and unemployed. In fact, an infant brought to the water for baptism is a sign of how we all come to God – with nothing, absolutely nothing (*From Dan Erlander’s Let the Children Come!*)” Therefore, even though we know that baptism contains the promise of forgiveness of sins, our emphasis first should be that God loves us so unconditionally, that like the wife that accepts the faults of her husband of fifty years, God loves us enough to forgive us, stick it out with us, die for us, and ultimately give us a community for where we can, warts and all, be accepted just as we are – flawed, sinful, but forgiven. Therefore, the key element of baptism is about God’s amazing love for us. Even when we do not keep our promises to God when baptized, we always know that God will keep God’s promises to us no matter what. We can always return to God. Holy Baptism promises us that God will always accept our return, whether it is a daily return through confession, or after some time when we tend to forget God’s love for us.

And, Luther rejoiced in this gift of unconditional love from God! As Pastor Daniel Erlander explains in his book, “Let the Children Come”, he reviews Luther’s explanation of the gift of Baptism in these three actions of God:

Slide: Ordinary Water

1. In ordinary water, the same water we use for cooking, drinking, bathing, when Christ’s promise is present, there God is present – hidden as God was hidden in the manger and on the cross.

Slide: Dead to sin

2. In baptism God delivers from ‘sin, death, and the devil’ and gives God’s Kingdom. God effects a change of “lordship” so to speak, from sin and death to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Slide: To do today...

3. AND last, but not least, in this beautiful sacrament, we are given a WAY OF LIFE, a daily pattern of returning to the waters of baptism and there we drown. We die again to the old turned in on the self-

person that we are, to a risen, forgiven, cleansed, and new life person in Christ.

Slide: Just as I am

So, yes, we do come to the water for forgiveness, but it's more than that. Baptism is about the action of God to love us and give us life, because God does love us, just as we are. But, as I tell all parents who bring their children for Holy Baptism, I tell you today. We baptize infants because the action of God's love is God's action not our own. An infant doesn't know how to confess sin, so there is much more involved than the forgiveness of sin. We do not come to God out of our own merit and decision, but by God's boundless, endless desire to be in relationship with us and God's desire to give us a community whereby we can learn about that love and know that love deeply.

Therefore, know that you are loved by a gracious God. The water bath, this gift of life we call baptism, is a daily gift. No matter how much you have screwed up, whether you feel good about yourself or not, even if you think God won't forgive you, the baptismal waters say that God will and does love, forgive, and renew you daily because of God's death and resurrection. Just as you are...yesterday, today, now, and into eternal life.

As a reminder of this gift of life, Pastor Nate and I are inviting you to come forward now for a baptismal blessing and reminder of God's love for you, just as you are.

Slide: Baptismal Blessing

(Leave up Blessing slide until blessing has ended – follow with hymn “Just as I am”)