

By the grace of God, the loving sacrifice of Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit, we have received two sacramental gifts in the Church: Baptism and The Lord's Supper, and we will celebrate both today.

Christianity is about water . . . it's about baptism . . . about falling into something elemental and wet. Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rivers and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy, because at the same time it's also holy, and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched. Now, little Arthur has been coming regularly to our backyard swimming pool with his family this summer, and I assure you that he cares very little about decorum, and loves getting drenched!

In Baptism, we are brought from death to new life (Romans 6:3-4). This death, even while we live and breathe on earth, is a death to self -- a sacrifice of self, so that we may be reborn in Christ to life in the world. It's Christ who baptizes. Our place is to accept the washing he offers. Baptism is his work, his gift, and ours to receive. However, to us who receive this gift he also hands a basin and a towel that are part of the church's role. We who have been washed become washers of feet . . . In this world then, we are in union with Christ, cleansed and clothed in Christ, to embark on a life of servanthood in the name of Christ.

In The Lord's Supper, again by God's grace, through the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, we receive and remember our gift of Salvation and are nourished for our call to servanthood in the name of our Lord and Savior. The table manners we learn here, receiving, giving, thanking, sharing, serving, equip us for living in the world, to feed others as we have been fed.

When we confess our sins in worship on Sunday and receive the Assurance of Pardon that declares, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17), we rejoice that our sins are gone, forgotten, and we can now move on with our lives, cleansed and renewed; and we remember our baptism and the covenant which God promised us in the very beginning: the Spirit of God enters our hearts, and we are changed.

The covenant promise of forgiveness originated at the beginning of Bible history. In the OT, in Ezekiel, (Chapter 36: 25-27), as the Israelites are returning to their homes from years of exile

and hardship, God promises: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you. I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (compassion). I will put my spirit within you, and enable you to follow my Way."

God has always shown mercy at certain times to his people, but through the sacrifice of Christ, told in the NT gospels, bestowing grace and forgiveness became a permanent source and action of the everlasting love of God.

Today, many churches have resorted to the use of sprinkled water on the head as our way to baptize; but in the early church the baptismal rite was filled with the vivid, physical senses of rebirth.

Because the converts were severely oppressed and thus overwhelmed by the idea that rather than living as condemned people, they could forget their shame and be washed clean forever, some, in their zeal to be made new, may have literally stripped off all their old clothes and left them behind forever, even buried them. Then, completely naked, they went down to the river, into the waters of baptism. They were completely immersed, and after coming out of the water, they were clothed in white robes that signified the righteousness of Christ. Their old life was completely finished -- visibly gone! Like togas worn by Roman citizens, baptismal robes were the clothes of citizenship in God's Realm. They could say, "God's gracious gift in Jesus Christ has us covered! We now live in grace, not condemnation!"

Yes, there is a cost in following Christ, who bids us to come die to ourselves that we might find resurrection life and new purpose. Jesus challenges us today: We must be willing to let go of those things that undo us and thwart our purpose. We must give up bad habits and make better priorities for ourselves. So many of us go back to putting on our old clothes! We hang onto the shame of our shortcomings. We don't want to expose our weaknesses, stand naked before each other and in the face of Christ himself. If we tell the truth about our mistakes, we're afraid others will reject us. Perhaps what we're most afraid of is that such condemnation will confirm the lie we've come to believe about who we are: that we're unlovable unless we conform to what others want us to be, that we're irreversibly broken and unworthy of God's love.

Fear of such naked vulnerability before God and one another was handled carefully, tenderly, and appropriately in the early church; it was drowned in Christ's forgiveness on the cross, resurrected in love, and clothed in God's grace.

In the Spirit, we regard each other as lovable children - beloved, not condemned. After all, if God is for us, who can be against us? Only Christ is in a position to condemn, and Christ loved us enough to die for us. Christ prays and advocates for us. In Christ, we are now part of God's

new creation. Every moment we confess our failures to God and ask to live in the reality of God's forgiveness in Christ, every moment we accept this power and trust its truth, we live in the newness of grace. The past is washed away and buried forever. We get to go back to the very beginning and try to live our baptism anew, praising God for his mercy. The question is: do we really believe this?

Part of our lives of faith is to confess our weakness as well as affirm what we believe. Psalm 139 assures that God loves us so intimately and perfectly, that there is no chance he will abandon us. Affirm your belief in the mercy of God with this psalm and you will be transformed in your life and able to begin over again if needed. I have fashioned a paraphrase of today's verses. Please pray with me now, and believe:

O Lord, always, you understand me. I will never be able to hide from you, nor be apart from you. You have plans for me, for who I am or will be. Ours is an intimate relationship; I do not have to speak for you to hear me; You are my own, ever-present God, who embraces and protects and blesses me. Your care is above and beyond all I can ever know. It is given to me by your promise and blessing. I have belonged to you from the beginning, you are with me always. I am a miracle of your creation, and it excites me to realize that I am the work of your hands in this beautiful world. I am an earth child, dust-to-dust, intricately made by you, a miracle that is unseen by anyone else. I am a lump of clay in your hands, to be shaped exclusively by your hand and purpose for my life. You have given me days on earth and a place in your world, to be a significant part of it. It is inconceivable that you would create **me** for this experience! I try to understand, but I must learn to trust in your holy and perfect ways for my life's direction and meaning, I am uniquely made from your love, blessed by you to be a blessing, to know your presence in my life, and to count on you to provide a masterful plan, just for me, that will bloom and thrive among your people. I want to know you to the best of my ability, but it will take a lifetime and more, to fully know you. I will abide with you, always discerning, so that you will know my heart and soul as I strive to know yours, and emulate your goodness that will lead me to a rich life on earth; so that when I come to the end, I am sure that you are there, with me. So search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.

Please join in singing the Communion Hymn, #490, "Wash, O God, Your Sons and Daughters"