
What is Your Baptism Story?

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A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.
All Saints Day-Year C

Do you have a baptism story?

I have heard mine more than once.

I was born in Columbia, South Carolina.

The first day did not go as planned. Just after my father had called all of the family to give them the good news of my arrival, the doctors told him that I would not survive the day.

My heart was too big. It was crowding my lungs and preventing them from getting enough oxygen. There was nothing that anyone could do.

My maternal grandmother suggested that I be baptized. So, they asked a Roman Catholic nurse to do it. The nurse knew her liturgy as well as her medicine, so she baptized me-in the name of the Father, and of Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Then they waited.

I'm not sure what happened next. No one else is either. All we know is that, miraculously, my lungs began to work.

Things didn't get better right away. Mother still bears several stories of my turning blue without warning. One time dad had to race down the hallways of the hospital to find the missing oxygen tanks. Another time mom had to submerge me in a bath of cold water to shock me into breathing again.

But, my lungs did ultimately work. Here I am. And, it's been awhile since anyone complained that they were having difficulty hearing me!

Beyond the occasional joke, though, I didn't think very much about my baptism story until I started having children of my own. It was then that I realized what it really means to have been blessed.

As I experienced what a gift our children were to us, I got a glimpse of what a gift my life had been to my own parents-and even to me. It made me think of the story of Abraham and Sarah.

I realized that we were, as they were, blessed in order to be a blessing.

Today is the first Sunday after All Saints Day, the day when we remember all of the ways that we have been blessed by all of the holy women and men who have gone before us.

We perform baptisms today as a reminder that, by this bathing, we are washed clean of sin and, with this anointing, we too are made holy people.

It doesn't happen all at once, of course. Baptism is not magic. We aren't trying to manipulate God into doing something that God would not otherwise do.

Baptism is a sacrament. It reveals to us a truth that we might otherwise have missed. It shows it to us in a way that we can see it.

The truth that baptism reveals is simply that we have been blessed by God's love for us. Our very lives are a gift. But, it's a gift that we have to live into.

That's what we are talking about when we talk about the process of becoming a person. We are always becoming who we are meant to be.

I won't really be George Maxwell until the day I die, and maybe not even then.

We become the person we are meant to be by imitating Christ. That is, after all, what it means to be a Christian. It's a little ironic, really, that we gain our unique individuality by imitating another person. But, faith is something that we have to live before it's something that we can understand.

Paul summarizes all of this in his letter to the Galatians. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves in Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3: 27-29)

Our Gospel reading for today is taken from Luke's "Sermon on the Plain." This passage describes a critical part of what it means to imitate Christ.

It's really all about relationships.

Many of the ethical standards sound so familiar that we don't really think about them when we hear them. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.

We are used to people claiming that they are doing these things without noticing any real change in their behavior.

But, there is one of these standards that always gets our attention. We know right away if we are living into this one.

"And if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again."

It's hard, frankly, for us to imagine that imitating Christ means that we are supposed to just stand there while someone steals our stuff.

Now, to be clear, I think that we understand that we are not our stuff.

We know that we are supposed to share with those who are in need, and to support the communities of which we are a part.

For example, I have heard from many of you that you are looking forward to our pledge procession today. It's one of those times when we experience a real sense of blessing. We feel it as we sing the repeating alleluias and put our pledge cards in the basket in front of the altar.

We know without having to think too much about it that these pledges are about our relationships-what it means to be in

communion with each other, to be accountable to each other, to believe in each other, to bless each other.

It is harder, though, to understand how letting someone steal our stuff is helpful to our relationships. It sounds more like enabling abuse. Besides, how there can be any real reconciliation without restoration?

Yet, sometimes that is exactly what forgiveness requires.

Do you remember the candlestick scene Victor Hugo's novel, *Les Miserables*?

Jean Valjean is wandering the streets of the city in the cold of the night. There is no room for felons in the inn. He had been imprisoned for nineteen long years after stealing bread for his starving sister and trying repeatedly to escape. He is angry. He is bitter. And, he trusts no one.

A compassionate bishop brings him home, gives him a hot meal, and offers him a bed for the night.

Understandably perhaps, Valjean gets up in the middle of the night, stuffs all of the silver on the shelves into a sack, and sneaks out of the house.

He doesn't get far. Soldiers arrest him and bring him back to the bishop.

The bishop greets him the second time with the same sense of compassion that he showed at first. With open arms and tear-filled eyes, he says to the soldiers that Valjean is telling them the truth. The silver had been a gift.

He looks at Valjean and tells him that he that, in his haste to leave, he forgot something. Then, the bishop takes two silver candlesticks off of the table and gives them to Valjean as well.

As the soldiers are leaving, the bishop tells Valjean that his life has been spared for God, and that he should use the money from the silver to make an honest man of himself.

This is, I think, Jean Valjean's baptism story.

This is the moment when the blessing of his life is revealed to him. And, he ultimately chooses to live into it, finding ways that he can be a blessing to others-even at the risk of losing his own life.

Lest you think that this kind of thing only happens in idealistic French novels, let me give you an earthier example.

Phil Robertson, the patriarch of the Robertson family in the popular A&E program "Duck Dynasty," tells a story in his book about dealing with what he calls "river rats." A "river rat" is someone who steals fish out of your nets or off of your lines.

When Phil discovered that people were stealing his fish, he did just what you might expect him to do. He got his gun and began patrolling the river. When he spotted someone lifting his nets, he ran them down in his boat and shot at them.

But, as God would have it, Phil was also reading his Bible during this time.

One day, he came across Paul's admonition in the twelfth chapter of Romans, "If your enemy is hungry; feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. ... Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."

Though not completely convinced of this wisdom, Phil decided to try it.

The next time he caught "river rats" lifting one of his nets, he offered to give them the fish that they were trying to steal. He pulled up the net himself and poured the fish out into their boat. He told them to invite all of their kinfolk to a fish fry. And, he told them that if they ever needed fish, they didn't have to steal them. All they had to do was come to his dock and ask. He would give them all of the fish they wanted.

People stopped stealing his fish after that. Every time he saw someone eying one of his nets, he'd offer them free fish. Then, he realized that he was giving away fewer fish that were previously being stolen from him. And, he realized something else.

In his words, he realized that "no matter how sorry and low-down somebody might be, everybody's worth something."

This is, I think, Phil Robertson's baptism story.

It is the moment that the blessing of his life is revealed to him. And, he ultimately chooses to live into it, finding ways that he can be a blessing to others-even at the risk of losing some of his own livelihood.

So, what is your baptism story?

When was the moment when the blessing of your life was revealed to you?

When did you choose to live into it?

How did you find ways that you could be a blessing to others?

What did you risk losing in the process?

Maybe this is our work this week. Right now, in this moment, we all know what it means to be blessed. As we celebrate the baptisms of these young children, we won't miss the miraculous gift that their new life is to us. We won't mistake the presence of God's love, even if we might not have used these words to describe it.

It's not hard, right now, to understand the story of Abraham and Sarah.

We know that we are, as they were, blessed in order to be a blessing.

It is important that we do this work, I think.

We have to be able to tell our own baptism stories before we can begin to teach these children about theirs.

We have to be able to feel the presence of God's love in our own lives before we can begin to point out the same gift in theirs.

And, the best way to teach them what it means to choose to live into this gift is to show them.

Our work is to show them that faith is something that we have to live before it's something that we can understand.

And, I look forward to watching them do just that for many years to come!

Amen.