
Adult Children of Christ-Like Baptism

A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith
Atlanta GA
Epiphany 1A

It's the first Sunday after the Epiphany, and in churches all over the world today we baptize new Christians into Christ's holy church. In our church year the Epiphany celebrates the three kings bringing royal gifts to the Christ child on Twelfth Night, always January 6th or the 12th day of Christmas. But today marks the close of the Christmas season as we fast forward from the birth of the Christ-child to the adult baptism of our Lord in the river Jordan. And so today I want to talk about a key feature of our baptismal covenant that connects us adults to our children.

The connection between baptized adults and our children is highlighted in our second reading today from the Book of Acts. There St. Peter declares: "Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God" (Acts. 10.34-35). And that declaration is consistent with this last affirmation of our baptismal covenant here in the Episcopal Church, when we commit to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." God shows no partiality, Peter declares in Acts; similarly as children naturally accept all sorts and conditions of people until they are taught to do otherwise. And accordingly our baptismal covenant enjoins us to "respect the dignity of every human being" regardless of our preferences, prejudices, or "partiality."

Today I want to highlight that particular link between our adult baptism into Christian fellowship and our children's natural openness to all people. And I want to do so in a "round about" way that I think will be particularly illuminating. But I promise to bring us back home to the baptismal covenant that we share with our youngest children on this day of baptisms around the world in Holy Church. I want to get there by way of talking about something quite ordinary that we also share with our children: so-called "slips of the tongue."

We call them "slips of the tongue," when you meant to say one thing but said something else instead. And we often find them humorous, or embarrassing, or revealing—revealing as in the sense of "Freudian slips." But on this holy day I'd like us consider how slips of the tongue connect us to children, and to the inner child in all of us—the child that endures even in the most aged or mature, or the most un-childlike or hardened adults among us. No matter what our age or our temperament or character, we will all continue to make mistakes with words: slips of the tongue that will continue to be amusing, embarrassing or revealing—just as if we were still children learning how to talk and sometimes getting it wrong.

Here are some of the classic ones from some notorious "tongue-tied" adult speakers:

Former Pres. George W. Bush is legendary in this area, we all recall. Once, presumably in a policy talk on education, the President wanted to say the word, "thank," but instead said, "I want to spank all teachers."

Former Vice Pres. Dan Quayle, another frequent tongue-slipper, in a comment supporting his boss, Pres. George H. Bush, declared boldly about the U.S. economy, "This president is going to lead us out of this recovery."

I don't know whether the movie mogul of the film industry, Samuel Goldwyn, was a frequent flubber in this category, but

he once was explaining why he was unavailable and meant to refer to an "'intestinal' illness but instead said, "I was laid up with intentional flu."

Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, defending his administration's law and order record, declared, "The police aren't here to create disorder, they're here to preserve disorder." Well, we all know what he meant to say, don't we? [SMILE!]

Finally, to return to the administration of George W. Bush, and in the category of Freudian slips, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice famously misspoke before all the nation during a press conference, when she said, "As I was telling my husband" as I was telling President Bush."

Well, we can all imagine the embarrassment. But Secretary Rice's smooth recovery reveals two features of adult slips of the tongue: No. 1, a skilled speaker often can just go on and correct the mistake as if nothing wrong happened; and, no. 2, if you do so yourself then everyone else is more likely to go along and take the mistake as a common occurrence that can happen to any one of us. The worst thing to do of course is to become so embarrassed or defensive and try to explain what was really meant as *if* such mistakes were not common occurrence that can happen to any one of us.

My hypothesis about our willingness to take these things for granted is that we're all used to making speech mistakes from our earliest childhood efforts. In fact it's one of the few areas in our adult lives where we all continue to grant each other license to retain child-like behavior without incurring harsh criticism or humiliation.

But here let me pose for you an entirely different category of speech mistakes that connects us adults with our childhood. And these are mistakes that we typically are not inclined to regard as embarrassing or humiliating. I call this category, "'endearing slips of the tongue.' And I have two immediate and obvious examples; one from a child and one from an adult, and both of them personal.

When my granddaughter mistakenly calls me "mommy," or even "daddy" when she knows very well that I'm really her grand-father" well, am I really concerned about that kind of mistake? I mean, do I make any real effort to correct her so she won't keep making that mistake? Of course not! Rather I find it endearing, even precious that she finds my care for her to have that kind of character or quality" as if I were her mommy or daddy.

Now for my adult example I want you to know that it's a little sensitive, so I got prior permission to share this one. It's such a compelling example, though, in light of today's gospel reading that I'm eager to share it with you. In fact for years I saved it as a recording on my cell phone; it was so special to me. It was part of a voice mail message that my father left for me during a time when I was his primary caregiver" during a time of illness in his life. On one occasion during that time I couldn't pick up the phone to speak with him directly so he left me this recorded message: "Thee, this is your son." That's right: he meant to say, "'this is your dad' but instead my father said to me, "This is your son."

Now, was I really concerned about that kind of mistake? Would I have made any effort to correct him so he wouldn't keep making that mistake? Of course not! Rather, like the case of my granddaughter I found it endearing, even precious that my father found my care for him to have that kind of character or quality" as if I were his dad and he my son.

And that's like the endearment that we hear expressed in today's gospel reading when Jesus rises up out the Jordan river and everyone hears a heavenly voice say to him, "This is my son, the beloved." There's the term of endearment between father and son, parent and child that we celebrate on this first Sunday after the Epiphany. And here we Christians claim that it was no "'slip of the divine tongue' that declared Jesus the divine son, and that it was not just a case of symbolic speech or metaphor. Rather we affirm the reality of an endearing relationship between Jesus and God, and we are the bearers of that endearing relationship in the world today, and the successors to those who first testified to that endearing relationship in their own time.

And that brings us to our own life and actions here today, as those who are baptized in Christ's name and into Christ's holy church, and those who are bringing to baptism [these] new members of holy church. What kind of endearing character are we enjoining on them, as we covenant with them to become part of holy church with us?

Here we are directed today by our reading appointed from the Book of Acts. St. Peter has been instructed by the Spirit to

go and present the gospel to some Gentiles whom he formerly regarded as unclean. But just hours before he heard a heavenly voice issue the following advisory, not once but three times: "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean" (Acts. 10.15). So today's reading begins with the apostle acknowledging that it would be wrong to deny the gospel message to those whom God has accepted out of any nation. "'Now I know,' the apostle confessed,

"'Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God' (Acts. 10.34-35).

Christian friends, adult baptized, parents and god-parents, as the welcoming community of those children who will be baptized today we are called by our Collect appointed for today to "'keep the covenant that we have made, and boldly confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior' (Book of Common Prayer, "Contemporary Collects," p. 214. In particular today we are called to do so by "'showing no partiality' among people. Rather, as we first affirmed in our baptismal vows and repeated will reaffirm, we are summoned to

strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. -Book of Common Prayer, "Holy Baptism," p. 305

And so Christian friends, adult baptized, parents and god-parents, as the welcoming community of those children who will be baptized today let us continue to keep the covenant that we adults have already made: a covenant to become ever more truly the "'beloved community' in the church and in the world; the Beloved Community of the Beloved Son'" of the Beloved Child and Children of God. Amen.

Excursus

There are many ways this endearing relationship is expressed in scripture, of course, in both the Old and New Testaments. Among my favorites is this passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1.18).

And while we invoking John how about this endearing passage from the First Letter of John, beginning at verse one:

We declare to you . . . what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life'"

this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us . . . (1 John 1.1-2)

Among the most sublime declarations of endearment is surely the first verses of 2nd Peter:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.

For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1.16-18).

But it is when we turn to the Old Testament that we arrive at our reading from the prophet Isaiah appointed for today:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

...

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching (Isaiah 42.1, 4).

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*