

# “Faith”

## *Valley Presbyterian Church – June 16, 2019*

### Sacrament of Baptism / Reception of New Members

Rev. John Wahl

Philippians 2:5-13

Matthew 7:7-14

A wise man once said to his students: *Three frogs were sitting on a log and one of them made a decision to jump into the pond. How many frogs were left on the log? Someone among the followers will almost always respond, two. No, the old sage says, there are still three. The one just made a decision to jump, he didn't do anything yet.*<sup>1</sup>

The third of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous states: *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understood him.* As difficult as this step may be; as hard as it is for any of us to give up even a little bit of control over our lives, this is the decision that Richard Rohr calls a “sweet surrender;” noting that Jesus made Step Three into his Step One by saying, “if anyone wants to follow me, let them deny themselves.” (Matt. 16:24)

Of course, turning ourselves over to God, surrendering our will and our lives, will always feel like loss; yet it is a necessary step to liberation – whether it is from alcohol or drugs, or from anything else that we might make into our idol. But when we turn away from...we at the same time must turn over to... Surrendering is the decision that we are making in baptism, as we are choosing to place our lives – or, in today's case, the life of a beloved child – into the care of a God that we understand as loving and life-giving.

It used to be – of course – hardly a decision at all about whether to baptize; it simply was the routine and expected thing to do – a foregone conclusion. In some churches, baptism was for infants; in others, it happened later for children, when they were considered old enough to make a decision of faith for themselves. But, in either case, baptism was a socially conditioned rite of passage. These days, however, it is less of a given. People question the why of baptism, as well as the where and how. What does this ritual mean if it is not required; if it means something different than a social norm or spiritual insurance policy?

Baptism is, at its core, an act faith. In our tradition, we say that it is an outward display of what we believe has already taken place: that God already knows and loves Summer Grace and all others that are presented for baptism. This is not the first introduction between God and the child, but instead a proclamation of belief that God

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Steps We Took* by Joe McQ

has already been at work in her life and in the lives of those who love her. God's grace was not somehow magically conjured up today, but was confirmed in the symbol of living water, infused by the movement of the Holy Spirit that is both within us and around us. To baptize is to profess our faith that God – as we understand God – is with us here and now.

And if this God is present, if the Holy Spirit is active, then we – as the people of God – are also called to respond in faith. There is, of course, no assurance that the children we baptize will be here until the day they graduate from high school. Some people move away, others may choose another faith tradition, and still others might choose no religious practice at all. And yet, in faith, we still make promises to nurture baptized children within the faith that we practice; to proclaim God according to our experience with and understanding of God.

These particular promises guide so much of what we do as a congregation. It leads us to invest in the Heart of Valley preschool program – to graciously provide and faithfully maintain the space that they use; to work with and pray for their teachers and staff; to welcome into our lives the children to learn and play, and their families to experience relationship and community. This same promise to nurture children will lead dozens of people to volunteer their time and talents during Vacation Bible School next week; often moving out of their comfort zones in order to share the good news of God's love with the children who will be here. It is what will take us to Pittsburgh two weeks from tomorrow for a week of mission service, doing home repairs for those in need; and yet understanding that through this service, our young people are being trained in the ways of humility and justice.

In these and many other ways, our congregation is making a decision; to love, nurture and value the children around and among us; including those who pass through the waters of baptism. Of course, making the decision doesn't get the frog into the water; it is the actions that follow the decision that will make the difference. Some of those actions are open and visible – for an alcoholic they would be stopping drinking, going to meetings, and finding a sponsor – but still other actions are private or invisible. They are the changes to how we think and believe; and to the way that we pray. “This may not mean God will always give us exactly what we ask for, because many times we're not wise enough to understand our needs appropriately. What is really being suggested is that the wisdom and goodness of our heavenly parent is going to shape that which God gives us in answer to our prayers.”<sup>2</sup>

In our gospel passage today, Jesus talks about this way that we pray, describing it with three different verbs: ask, search, and knock. He wants his hearers to know that when they pray, it is to the God who has already chosen to love us without limit or condition. For many of us, the best example we know of this type of faithful love

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<sup>2</sup> John Claypool, “To Whom Do We Pray?” from *Day1.org*

is that of a parent, who always desires to grant our requests in our best interests. “How much more,” Jesus asks, “will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?” (Matt. 7:11)

But if, for whatever reason, we do not understand God in this way, it might cause us to be timid in our prayers: reluctant to ask, fearful of searching, hesitant to knock. This might well be because something else has been our god, our idol, the thing we put first in our lives. Because of its hold on us, because of the insanity in our lives it has caused, we eventually admit that we are powerless to it. It is this that Jesus asks us to renounce; and that Step Three instructs those who are in recovery programs to turn away from. And, instead, we turn to God – to our own understanding of what that Higher Power for our will and our lives might be.

Speaking about prayer, and those who might be reluctant to pray boldly, Tom Long says:

*Those who think of God as punitive, who imagine that God is as ready to curse as to bless, who picture God as a divine lion ready to pounce, will tiptoe carefully around the lion’s den. Their prayers, if they dare to pray at all, will sound like the careful calculations of a clerk asking the boss for a day off. To the contrary, Jesus insists that God is not a ravenous lion, not a prison guard, or a truant officer; God is a loving parent who promises to provide good gifts to those who ask in prayer.<sup>3</sup>*

During this preaching series, we are working with Richard Rohr’s assertion that recovery is a modern-day redefinition of salvation. In this framework, Step Three – making the decision to turn over our will and our lives to God – is not yet a full recovery; but it is a necessary act of faith. In the same way, the Christian tradition teaches that a decision for baptism is not the fullness of salvation, that there are still other steps in the process. Some of those are outward and public – that is where these promises made on Summer’s behalf might come in – while others are inward and private; they are between you and your God. But even if, as Jesus says in the closing verses of today’s reading, the road we walk as Christians is sometimes narrow and hard, God is always with us: waiting for us to ask, looking to be found when we search, listening for a knock.

Daughters and sons of God, remember your baptism, and be thankful. And remember that God is always loving us, and with us, and waiting to hear from us. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Commentary