A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*The Drama of Baptism*

Romans 6.1-4

June 21, 2020

Both the Gospel reading for today from Matthew 10 and the Epistle reading from Romans 6 speak of Christian life and faith in terms of life, death and new life in Christ. That’s the drama of Christian faith, the drama played out in baptism.

In Matthew 10, Jesus says to his followers, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For us, this may be mystical speculation about finding the path to life’s true meaning. But to them, to be a disciple of Jesus was likely going to be a matter of life and death. Earlier in this same chapter Jesus called the 12 disciples and then sent them out with his authority into all the towns and countryside to cast out unclean spirits, heal diseases and afflictions, and preach: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He said to them, “I am sending you out as sheep among wolves.”

In the passage read this morning, he speaks of the potential effects of this Gospel proclamation: a man turned against his father, a daughter turned against her mother. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” he said. (Thank you, Lectionary, for giving us this passage on Father’s Day. Thanks for nothing.) But we remember that in that time, in Jesus day and the first generation of Christians that followed, there was no family initiation into the faith. A person came to Christ as an individual in the early Church, often leaving his or her family behind to do so. When we speak of the “cost of discipleship” most of us really have little idea of the cost borne by so many who have come to Christ. And that may mean we also have little appreciation for the transformation experienced by so many who have come to Christ from the heart of darkness. And that may mean we can easily lose sight of the utter world changing, liberating power that God works in and through those who call on his name.

Father John Markey wrote a marvelous little book on the life conversion of Moses, which brings this to light. Moses, whose whole story is about being turned against his father to follow God. And not just turned against his father, but Moses’ story shows how conversion to faith is not just an inward private matter, but puts those who are thus converted in solidarity with the suffering so that they, too, can follow God. Moses went from being a satisfied, privileged child of power in Pharaoh’s walls to identifying with the miserable state of the Jews in Egyptian slavery, and then leaving the walls of security to join them and lead them in their quest for freedom even if it meant tearing down the walls. Moses said to them, “You are not slaves anymore. You are free. God has set you free.”

The emancipation of Moses, that he may proclaim the emancipation of all God’s people, is nothing short of a picture of conversion. Markey writes, “Moses’ willingness to accept God’s invitation to trust God and to follow the mission that he is given in spite of his own fear and apprehension represents what the Hebrew tradition calls faith . . .This faith then is neither a single act nor a belief in an abstract idea nor passive trust in an all-powerful deity; it is a journey, a relationship with a living God grounded in trust that requires people to open their lives to a new and unknown future.” That’s the kind of faith Jesus calls us to.

Like little Moseses, each of the disciples also faced a decision about their lives: stay where you are in your station in life: a fisherman, a tax collector; they were ordinary young men going through their ordinary days--stay in their little worlds or accept the invitation, the call, from Jesus to follow him where he goes and to go where he sends, no matter the cost. They faced a choice that I think at least for some of them must have been difficult—no matter how easily it reads in the Gospels to drop their nets and follow. “Follow me” is one thing. “Leave the walls of your security and take up your cross” is quite another. Will you stay where you are or open your life to a new and unknown future?

Years ago, in college I volunteered to be a summer missionary with the Baptist Student Union. I checked the box on the application to be sent to a boy’s ranch in Oklahoma for the summer. Bailing hay, leading Bible studies, playing sports with the boys. Sounded great. But I got word that I would be sent to Brasov, Romania, instead. I, uh, didn’t sign up for that. Neither did my parents, by the way, whose feelings on this matter I’m beginning to respect more and more the older my children get.

Whatever our concerns, there I was, on stage at a church for a commissioning service with about 50 other college students being sent around the world for the summer. They had each of us hold a candle while they prayed for us. That was nice, but then over the loud speaker while we were supposed to lift our candles in the air, they played a contemporary Christian song called “The Great Adventure.” Like many songs of the genre at the time, it was kind of cheesy, picturing Christian discipleship as saddled-up cowboys galloping through the landscape of Grace. But, you know, it kind of worked too, especially the opening lyrics:

*Started out this morning in the usual way:  
Chasing thoughts inside my head of all I had to do today.  
Another time around the circle, try to make it better than the last.  
I opened up the Bible, and I read about me.  
Said I'd been a prisoner and God's Grace had set me free,*

*and somewhere between the pages It hit me like a lightning bolt.  
I saw a big frontier in front of me, and I heard somebody say, “let's go!”*

I don’t know about saddling up your Gospel horses, but God’s grace has set us free and continues to set us free on the path to freedom. Conversion to the way of Christ is a lifelong journey with God, yes, even a great adventure. In Romans 6, where St. Paul describes spiritual transformation, he speaks of it as this kind of journey, one that is set in motion in baptism. Should we continue in sin so that God will give us more and more grace? No way--don’t you remember? You were baptized . . .and that changed everything for you. You are different now. Everything is different now.

When I meet to study and pray with people who are preparing for their baptism, we often turn to Romans 6 along the way. We talk about the way this passage describes our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ through baptism. “All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried, therefore, with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too, might walk in newness of life.”

The drama of baptism reminds believers that the source of their life is the death and resurrection of Christ. When we are lowered into the water, it is an image of Christ lowered in the tomb of death. It is the death of our old selves. When we descend into the water and the water closes over our head, it is like being buried. Then, when we emerge from the water, it is like rising from the grave.

Remember, when Romans was written, to become a Christian meant everything in your life would change. Like for Moses and for the disciples, in baptism, “a person came to a decision which cut his life in two, a decision which often meant that he had to tear himself up by the roots, a decision which was so definite that it often meant nothing less than beginning life all over again” (William Barclay, *Romans,* 83). Baptism is symbolically like dying and rising again. We die to one kind of life and rise to another; we die to the old life of sin and rise to walk in the new life of grace.

Now, perhaps your baptism didn’t seem quite that dramatic. But whatever it meant for you in your own life, remember, every baptism is a participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. Ultimately baptism isn’t about our experience. Each baptism is a part of Christ’s redemption, one conversion at a time.

Perhaps your baptism didn’t seem quite that dramatic to you. Perhaps it was more like a rite of passage when you were old enough to make the faith that had been given to you by fathers and mothers—to make it your own, as much as you understood. God blesses that, too. Perhaps you would even say that later events in your life were more spiritually significant than the day of your baptism. Perhaps you would even say that your ‘real’ conversion happened later. Lots of people tell their story that way.

I would simply say that conversion in the way of Christ and with Christ begins with our first response to God’s grace and continues through all our lives as we live in grace and walk in mercy no matter where that path takes us and no matter how often we stumble and fall. Baptism is a one-time event in our lives, but dying to self and rising again to walk in new life… well, that happens over and over and over.

There are moments when God’s grace burns again through the fog of the humdrum, in the familiar ruts worn down by our daily sleepwalk through life. There are moments when God’s truth cuts through the fears and anxieties that can immobilize us. There are moments when God’s love reshapes the way we see our neighbor, maybe seeing her or him for the first time as a child of God. There are moments when the heart of Jesus touches our hearts. and we experience, as if it were the first time, God’s grace--just when we needed it the most.

These are all steps in our conversion--these moments of renewal.

To sweet Olive, whose baptism we celebrate today,

and to all who remember their baptism,

and to all, who, even now, are being called to respond in faith to Christ for the first time . . .

May this Christian life be for you a great adventure. May your baptism be renewed in your heart in joy, and may you trust God to follow him, head, heart, hands, and feet—all that has been submerged and buried and all that has been raised to new life—that you may follow him into unknown future –the new future of all who walk in resurrected, liberated life in Christ.

For all of this, we say thanks be to God. Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2020