

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Service of Baptism, November 8, 2009
Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Romans 6:3-11

WALKING TOGETHER

Ana and Riley represent life to us; they embody life filled with promise that gives us hope even in these dreary times. Looking at them, we see God's commitment to the ongoingness of human life, our life. So it is with joy and delight that we baptize them into the community of Christ's church and, we trust and pray, into the family of God. We name them daughters of the covenant of grace that God has made with us in Christ.

Well, Paul must have been the first Christian party pooper. "Do you not know," he writes, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Who wants to talk about death on a day like this, a day to celebrate life? But Paul is right, the core significance of baptism has been from times more ancient than Christianity that the person plunged beneath the waters is symbolically dying. The old is drowned so the person can be raised up again from the waters fresh and new.

Ana and Riley are already fresh and new. Paul did not yet know of infant baptism, but even if he had, it would not have changed his mind. To be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is to be baptized into Jesus' death, because his death was and remains forever the consummate event of God's redemptive love. In his suffering, humiliation, and execution, Jesus embodies the fulness of God's love for us but also the fulness of our alienation from God, from each other, and from our rightful selves. By faith, we see God in him crucified. God, I believe, sees Jesus crucified in our sufferings and humiliations in life. I believe God sees Jesus' death in ours, uniting God with us in all our griefs. On the happier side, I believe God sees Jesus in our children and delights with us in their curiosity, their wholehearted pleasure in the wonderful little surprises and happy moments of life that without them we would overlook in our rush and busyness. No matter how many times we have seen a butterfly, a bird, a puppy, a sunset, or a rainbow, we see them anew on the faces of our children. They renew us with their un-jaded vitality.

A infant cannot die to the old person she has been, because she is brand new. There is no old Ana or old Riley to die with Jesus. These baby girls cannot leave their past behind and start over. But there is an Ana and a Riley who might have been—a woman who now is never to exist—a woman apart from Christ, a stranger to God's redemptive love. That woman has died here this morning. Her death is symbolic, of course. We work no magic in

this place. Baptism, as a sacrament, is a physical prayer, because that's the best we can do, asking God to make real by the Spirit what we can only symbolize with water. But may we commit ourselves to our prayers and not just drop them here and leave them at the font. Baptism without follow-up in the community of faith is like a wedding without subsequent life together in love shared, joys and disappointments worked through as a couple. Who gets married without then sharing life? Who gets baptized without then being brought up in the community of faith in Jesus Christ?

We need each other. Christian faith is not a privately held world view or set of beliefs; it is a walk together. Jesus did not suffer and die so we could feel "spiritual" by ourselves, in ourselves, for ourselves. He defines life as wholehearted and deeply committed love for God, compassionate love for our neighbors, and love for ourselves that is honest and healthful—a self-love that is not selfish. How can I walk alone in his newness of life? How am I to cooperate with him in bringing me out of my aloneness in myself if I withdraw from the community of faith into narcissistic spirituality? Private Christian faith is a contradiction in terms, which does not mean I must talk about my faith all the time, injecting Jesus into every conversation until people are tired of hearing his name and sick of me. Shared grace is a way of life, not a religious sales pitch. We are not called to talk at people but to share the life and hope Christ gives us. And yet, we cannot share life and hope with people unless we share also their doubts, griefs, and sufferings. There is a hymn that puts this truth very plainly:

Races and peoples, lo! we stand divided,
And sharing not our griefs, no joys can share.[†]

We need to walk together. Life is given to be shared. Our differences should strengthen us, not set us against each other. Jesus Christ brings people together, overcoming the barriers that divide us. He has told us to become like children again. Adulthood without faith's confidence in God replaces the child's curiosity about life with suspicion of differences and turns understanding toward contempt rather than compassion. Instead of enjoying, we seek to possess, control, and manipulate. Instead of getting up after a fall and running after life again, we lie in the dust blaming ourselves or others for our stumble. Trust renews our spirits and brings us back to life, but we can't do it alone. We really do need each other.

Paul continues, "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." God's glory is nothing else but redemptive love. God could not let go of Jesus, let him pass out of life and memory. God had to have him back, but as Jesus united himself with us in suffering, humiliation, and death, so we are united with him in

resurrection. He did not die for himself, and neither has he been raised for himself, but rather to live as the firstborn of many sisters and brothers, two of whom are named Ana and Riley.

Deuteronomy presents us with a poetic picture of life centered around the redemptive love of God and so infused with grace. Yahweh, the LORD, is our God, Yahweh alone! And you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, soul, strength, intelligence, and vitality! Look at the symbols, the images. I'll tell you what they mean to me. Writing the words as a sign upon our hands represents God's grace in all our work and doings, guiding the uses to which we put our skills. Binding the words between our eyes represents God's grace guiding our outlook on life, the way we see other people and human society—steering us away from prejudices and the many rationalizations people use to exploit others or just ignore each other's dignity, worth, and rights. Write the words on the doorposts of your house: make God's grace the way of life in your household. Write them on your gates: make love for God the open, welcoming, and generous spirit with which your family greets the community and the world and with which, I hope also, the church greets the community and the world.

“Teach them diligently to your children.” The image, I have read, is like that of whetting a knife on a strap or stone, honing, sharpening, renewing. “Walk in newness of life.” Sharpen your faith and that of your children. Hone their hope and trust in God so redemptive love will become their truth and grace their spirit.

Ana and Riley are children of the covenant of grace God has made with us in Christ. Let's enjoy them and the hope they bring from God into our lives. Let us as sisters and brothers of Jesus walk together with him in that newness of life to which he calls us and for which he opens ways forward. Amen.

† “Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation,” Laurence Housman, 1919, hymn #486 in *The Hymnbook*, 1955.