



Holy Baptism, God's Love Song for All

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Judith T. Beck
Former Associate Rector of St. Peter's Church, Now Retired
Sunday, August 3, 2008*

“Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’”
Matthew 13:16

It has been a long time since I have preached a sermon, a little over two years to be exact. Much has happened in that time, much has happened especially in the Episcopal Church and perhaps, most of all, in our own diocese. While there is much that has been good that has occurred in the Episcopal Church in these last two years, especially here at St. Peter's Church, there has also been much that has been troubling, deeply troubling. And, much of that has been devastating to me, shaking my faith in the church to the core, throwing up for questioning every assumption I have made about the church and its behavior.

So, when Ledlie asked me to preach this morning, I hesitated before answering. I wondered if I should be preaching at all let alone on an occasion as important as the occasion of baptism, one of the two primary sacraments of the Episcopal Church—sacraments ordained by Christ himself and the only two named in the Bible, the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is the other.

But, I accepted, as more of a test, I must admit, than out of any positive feelings I might have had. I thought the challenge might do me some good.

But, the truth be known, there was something else that drew me to accept Ledlie's invitation to preach on this occasion. Something that dwells deep within the soul and transcends every human design, even the church: Our Christian faith.

Throughout the trials and tribulations in this diocese over the past two years or so, I found myself holding on to the church by only the most slender of threads. That thread was and still is the faith the church has given me—faith in Jesus Christ. The funny thing is that as I found myself suspended on that thread, I was surprised to find that my faith was actually becoming stronger. In fact, the thread became more like a spider's thread in a web than a slender strand of silk. It was, strangely enough, strong enough to support me and sustain me, even catch the food that would nourish me. The more disillusioned I became with the church, the more important this man Jesus became for me and the stronger my faith became.

It is about this faith in this remarkable man that I would like to speak this morning, on this baptismal occasion.

I accepted the invitation to preach today because this rite which we administer this morning is not so much about the church as it is about this exquisite but fragile faith the church holds in its hands. At the conclusion of the baptismal rite, the newly baptized is marked with the sign of the cross on the forehead and the words, “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever.”

Marked as Christ's own forever. Sobering words or they should be at least.

As Christians, we are nothing if not Christ's own. We may belong to this part of the church or that—Baptist, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Episcopalian—but fundamentally we who are baptized are Christians. We bear the name of Christ *forever*. In this pluralistic society that is no small responsibility.

But, as weighty as that may seem, for me it has become a blessing—a blessing because of who this Christ is that we claim in baptism.

He is none other than the one who miraculously fed “5,000 men, besides women and children” with nothing more than five loaves and two fish—this morning’s Gospel lesson. Preposterous many would say, 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish? This is the sort of thing that those who would heap ridicule on our faith love; it is proof of the absurdity of our faith, something no thinking person would believe. It’s like a fairytale.

But perhaps that is just the point. It is all a myth, a myth in the grandest form—a wonderful, fantastic, life-giving, meaning-making myth. Like all true myths, this story embodies the essence of the principles and ideals of our faith. It points to the central propositions of our faith which make all the superficial machinations of the church seem commonplace by comparison. It points to the power of God, God at work in Jesus Christ and if in Jesus in each one of us as well.

A common explanation of the story, which just might be the most accurate explanation, is that all that food, enough to feed 5,000 and more people and still leave 12 baskets full of leftovers, came from the pockets and baskets of the throngs of people who had come to see Jesus. Sort of like our church potluck suppers. You know, where you take home more than you brought and yet everybody has had more than enough to eat—where does all that food come from !!??

Others would interpret this story as pointing to something beyond the resources of our human making; they would call it a miracle. Supernatural or natural occurrence, the point is that the story embraces the incredible truth of the faith we inherit in baptism.

Through this strange person of Christ, the centerpiece of our faith, we see the power of God to sustain us, we see the incredible hospitality and generosity of the one in whom we profess our faith when we are baptized. “You feed them,” Jesus says to the disciples when they suggest to him that he send them away so that they might go into the villages and buy food for themselves. After a long day in the hot sun with nothing to eat, and now with the night beginning to fall, Jesus replies, “they need not go away, you give them something to eat.”

And so it is in this faith we are given in baptism. This Christ of ours never sends us away to hunt for our own food.

Jesus never turned his back on those who came to him in need—the poor or those who were hurting or in need of healing; he never abused anyone—*well maybe the money changers in the temple got a bruise here or there*; he never killed anyone; he never raised an army or invaded someone else’s lands. When times became difficult, he never tried to place the blame on someone else. He took full responsibility for his own actions and accepted fully the consequences of his own principles, even as those principles lead to death on the cross and crucifixion.

He never tried to force or coerce or conscript anyone to follow him. Instead, he led by example, an example that still has the power to speak to millions to this day.

It was this Jesus that has sustained me in these difficult times in my own diocese. As a Christian, I have this example, this incredible figure, to hold on to. *And for that, I am forever grateful.* It is one of the most powerful gifts in the whole world and to think that it is given to us in the simple rite of baptism.

In the end baptism is a love song from God, a love song for all humanity. Forget all the language about sin and death and new birth in the rite; there is that too, but most of all, baptism is the means by which we hear the song of God’s love for us. The love given to us by God’s own self, come down to dwell with us and if with us, then in us as well. For what this Jesus Christ is, God is also. And through Christ, God’s song becomes ours as well.

My song is love unknown, my savior’s love to me, love to the loveless shown
that they might lovely be.

O who am I that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine: never was love, dear King, never was grief
like thine.

This is my friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.

From the hymn *Love Unknown*

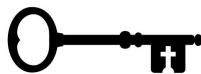
This is the faith that we inherit at baptism. This is the faith of the church.

We get off track, way off track as the church, but the essence of who we are is always there. We are the body of Christ, the one who feeds the hungry, heals the sick, brings solace to those who suffer, tends to those who hurt; the one who never sends away anyone who is hungry.

That is who Christ is and who we are as well.

This is the blessing we have in baptism.

It is the song we sing. Amen.



Open hearts. Open minds.