

Fulfilling Our Promise

By: Penny Holste

January 8, 2017. Baptism is a two-way street. God promises us his unconditional love, and we too make a promise. We promise to follow in God's way. The roles we play in our lives may describe us, but only God can define us. He has made us more. Pastor Penny talks today about how we can use the encouragement God gives to us to live out his way and fulfill the promise we made at our baptisms.

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We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It has been said that when Sam Houston, famous politician and soldier and also given to fights, was baptized as an adult in a spring in a river, when he came up out of the water his friends congratulated him and they said, "Well general, now all your sins have been washed away." "If that be the case," Houston said, "Then God help the fish." He was an honest politician. And certainly when we think of baptism, as I mentioned with the children, we think of our sins being washed away. But baptism is so much more. And it kind of caught me off guard in our text study: baptism is a two-way street. We think of baptism as God's promise of unconditional love and strength. But we make a promise too. We make a promise at our baptisms, as a response to God's gracious offer. We promise to stay away from sin and to follow in God's way. I think it's really hard to keep in mind that second part. You know, it's wonderful to know that your parents love you. But then if that means you have to clean your room, that's a little harder. It's wonderful to know that God loves us unconditionally, but it's not always easy to pry ourselves out of a warm house on a cold January morning — which you did — and write out that check for the offering when you have other needs. It's easy to focus only on what God is doing and not what we do. Maybe when our response seems hard, when it's hard to come to focus on our response to God's promise, we need to look at God's promise again. What is actually being promised in baptism?

Jesus' baptism is a good case in point. And it may have surprised you, as it does every year, that Jesus was just born two weeks ago and now he is an adult and he's being baptized. Well, of course it's because we know so little about his life in those intervening years. There's one story about him. But it serves our purpose well today to think that Jesus arrives at his baptism with a clean slate. He has not begun his ministry. He's done no miracles. He's done no teaching, no healings, no self-sacrificial acts. And still God says to him in baptism, "This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." We hear God also saying a similar thing to another unnamed servant, in the Old Testament lesson in Isaiah we read this morning where God says to his servant, "My soul is delighted in you." Those are the words that are meant to be conveyed to us in our baptisms: that God is delighted in us.

And you know, this is unconditional. Just as Jesus had not done anything yet in his ministry, just as an infant has done nothing to deserve God's love, and the promise is made — so that promise continues throughout our lives unconditionally, whether we begrudgingly came to church this morning, or whether we have had an argument with our best friend, whether we have recently fallen off the wagon (whatever that could mean in your life), whether we have shirked our duties and instead involved ourselves in activities that gave us pleasure, whether we have hurt someone we love. Even then God is delighted in us, because that is who God is. Because that is who God chose to be. Because God chose us as children. Now I think we need to know, I think we have a yearning to know, that God loves us unconditionally.

A few days ago Keith and I went to the movie "Fences" starring Denzel Washington. He plays a man in

the early 20th century who is from a poor neighborhood, but he does have a job, a home, a wife. He loves a child, but he has a yearning for more. He has a yearning, he says, to be able to laugh from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, to be able to sing. I think he needed fulfillment. He needed to know he was more than his job or his marriage or his parenthood. And I think we can understand that, because we are many things too. We play many roles. We have many interests in life. We are husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, children. We are doctors, lawyers, students, teachers. We are knitters, we are bridge players, we are runners, we are golfers. And these things bring us joy, and sometimes they don't. But is that really who we are? Don't we have a yearning to know that there's more to us than that? These things come and go. These things might describe us, but they do not define us. We are more than all the things we do and all the roles we play and all the things we've accomplished. And God tells us what does tell us who we are. And it is God's promise of unconditional love, no matter what, that we are bringing delight to God's soul. That is what defines us. And when we focus on that, that does give us the encouragement to live out our part of the bargain, to live out God's righteousness.

The word "righteous" comes up a couple times in today's texts. And it has a lot of meanings. But you notice that at first, John wouldn't baptize Jesus because Jesus had no sins to wash away. But Jesus insisted. He said no, we'll do it to fulfill all righteousness. And then in Isaiah, the passage that Brett read, God says to this unnamed servant, "I have called you in righteousness to be a covenant to the world, to be a light to the nations, to bring sight to the blind, to open the dungeons of all those who are slaves." Now, this isn't talking about keeping the rules. When we pledge to God at our baptisms we are not saying that we are going to keep all the rules, because we know we won't. But what we are pledging is to let God use us to bring righteousness to the world, to make the world all right.

Sometimes we see that done in people's lives, that response to their baptismal vow in such a clear way. Many of you know about Harriet Tubman. I don't know a lot about her, but I've been hearing more about her lately, and she is so intriguing. An African-American woman who was born in the early 1800s, born a slave in the state of Maryland. And she was in a horrible situation, as most slaves are. And by using the Underground Railroad, that network of people that helped slaves escape, she was able to get away to her freedom in Philadelphia. She was a strong Christian. She felt that God called her to certain things. She had dreams. So she went back into slave territory 13 times, risking her own freedom and her own life so that she could free hundreds of others, hundreds more slaves than herself. And this is the reason she did it. She says, "Twant me, 'twas the Lord. I always told Him, 'I trust to you. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me,' and He always did." Because not only does God give us this promise of unconditional love but God gives us the Holy Spirit and our baptisms. God gives us strength. In the Old Testament lesson, God said to this unknown, unnamed servant, "I take you by the hand."

And that is what God does: God takes us by the hand. God has our back as we work to free people from their various dungeons. God gives us the courage, for instance, to talk to the woman who comes to work every day with eyes red from crying, and ask her what's going on in her life. God may give us the courage to talk to a family member whose behavior we feel is getting really self-destructive, to talk to them about it. God may give us the courage to write a letter to the editor of a paper about something we see going on in the community that is unjust. God may give us the courage to stand up when we hear someone being badmouthed, whether they're there or not, or whether someone is being bullied. God gives us this courage because we have the Holy Spirit. We are not alone. And maybe when we shy away from these things, when we want to forget about our part of this bargain, our response to God's unbelievable promise — maybe the only thing we can do — is very simple: maybe we should just ask at the beginning of each morning just a simple prayer, a simple thought that as we're washing our faces, as we're taking our showers, as we're cleaning our bodies, to ask God to remind us of how we

were baptized. And how everything that will happen to us that day, all the things we'll be involved with, the things that we'll throw ourselves into and maybe we'll be successful or maybe we won't, they are not us. They may describe us, but they do not define us. That God has made us more, that we are sons and daughters of God, beloved ones in whom God finds delight.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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