

SERMON TITLE: "Improving Our Lives through Spiritual Disciplines: Reaffirming Our Baptism"  
SERMON TEXT: Romans 6:1-14  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: January 15, 2023, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Just for fun, I'm going to start my sermon with a joke.

A Baptist and a Catholic were discussing the different ways their churches baptized people: total immersion or just pouring water on the head. The Catholic said, "Well, just how much water do you need? If someone waded into a river knee-deep, would that be enough?"

The Baptist replied, "Oh, no. Much more than that would be required."

"Waist deep?" the Catholic asked.

"Keep going," said the Baptist.

"How about if the water came up to his chin?"

"Higher yet," replied the Baptist.

"Over his head?" asked the Catholic.

"Yep! Now you're talking!" exclaimed the Baptist.

"Well, there you go," said the Catholic. "A little bit over the head is exactly what we do!"<sup>1</sup>

On January first, I began a New Year's sermon series on improving our lives through spiritual disciplines. The first in the series was faithful participation in Holy Communion. Last week, we talked about the importance of reading the Bible regularly. Today, we're talking about baptism.

Someone could logically question why I would include baptism in a list of disciplines. By United Methodist theology, baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event. It's certainly not something you do as a daily habit, as a weekly routine, or even as a monthly or annual ritual. I guess that's why this sermon will focus not just on baptism, but on "reaffirming our baptism." Reaffirmation of our baptism is an occasional ritual that's provided for us in our United Methodist Hymnal—something quite meaningful

that we are going to do later in this service. But, in a more general sense, reaffirming our baptism is something we can do often and even consistently. So today, let's consider how this spiritual discipline can improve our lives.

### **1—IMPROVES OUR LIVES THROUGH BELONGING TO A FAMILY OF FAITH**

Like our original baptism itself, reaffirming our baptism improves our lives, first of all, through belonging to a family of faith. Whether we were first baptized as a tiny baby or were baptized later as a youth or full-grown adult, our original baptism signified an initiation into Christ's holy church. We were incorporated into the body of Christ. Much like the sacrament of Holy Communion, baptism connects us with the other people who believe and practice the Christian faith. Baptism is a kind of wet glue that sticks us together and holds us in close spiritual community.

Over the centuries of Christianity, there have been a lot of debates about whether the church should baptize only youth and adults, or whether it's good for parents to baptize their babies and small children. In the United Methodist Church, we see merits in both and allow for either one. When parents choose to bring their little ones for baptism, they're emphasizing this baptismal characteristic of belonging to a family of faith. The infant is not independent. The baby can't choose for himself. She can't select her family, their values, or their beliefs. He can't determine where they go or what they do. She can't decide not to participate in what's happening. By virtue of being born, he belongs. The same is true for baptism. By virtue of being baptized, a person immediately becomes part of a family of faith. Whether in infancy or middle age, a newly-baptized person instantly benefits from belonging to a caring, loving, faithful people who are committed to nurturing that new Christian in the ways of Christ.

The discipline of reaffirming our baptism comes as we remember and rejoice regularly and constantly in this wonderful belonging. Every time we reaffirm our baptism, we remind ourselves that we are in a good place with good and loving people. We are connected to a trustworthy community in

which we can safely develop ourselves to our fullest potential. Reaffirming our baptism improves our lives through belonging to a family of faith.

## **2—IMPROVES OUR LIVES THROUGH CHOOSING TO TURN AWAY FROM SIN**

A second way baptism and its reaffirmation improve our lives is through choosing to turn away from sin. This aspect of baptism is more obvious when a person is old enough to make decisions for him or herself. The theme song of youth or adult baptism could be “I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back.”<sup>2</sup> This conversion commitment is especially poignant on the day of baptism. But even if we were baptized as a child, or when our baptism-by-choice was years before, we can recall that spiritual act and reaffirm daily our commitment to the vows of baptism to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of [our] sin.”<sup>3</sup>

The symbolism of baptism is that God washes us clean from sin. God certainly is a powerful agent in the baptismal event. But the power of baptism also comes from our resolve and determination to drown sin to death and then rise up from the baptismal waters to live a more holy life. After we get cleaned up, the point isn't to go out and roll around in the mud again. We have to want to stay clean. Baptism without a commitment to Christian living is no more than a magic trick doused in water.

This is something I try to explain to parents or grandparents who want to have their little ones baptized. Part of the ritual for children's baptism asks the parents, “Will you nurture your children in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?”<sup>3</sup> Baptism doesn't mean much if you do it just for the sake of checking it off your list or satisfying your more-religious relatives. For baptism to be effective, we have to choose to make baptism a reality in our hearts and our daily practice. Our lives, and our children's lives, are improved when we choose to turn away from sin—not only at the moment of baptism, but as a daily and lifelong spiritual discipline.

### **3—IMPROVES OUR LIVES THROUGH RECEIVING GOD’S HELP**

As all of us know, of course, our choices alone aren’t enough to save us from the powers of evil that exist in our hearts and the world around us. To do that, we need God’s divine power. That’s why our baptismal liturgy also asks this question: “Do you accept the freedom and power *God gives you* to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” As Christian persons, we have a major role to play. Our decisions matter. But evil, injustice, and oppression are way too big for us to fight all by ourselves. That’s why the baptismal ritual reminds us that God is eager to help us. If we are willing to receive God’s assistance, God is more than willing and able to provide it for us. God is overjoyed and trustworthy to provide us freedom and power. Baptism and the reaffirmation of our baptism improve our lives by providing opportunities for us to receive God’s strong help.

Admitting that we need help is humbling, for sure. But, like they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, we need a power greater than ourselves if we are going to conquer what ails us. We need not only to choose to change but also to *choose God* to help us change.

Sometimes I’ll be talking with someone who says they’re ready to turn their lives around. But they don’t really have a plan about how they’re going to do that. So, in just a short time, their resolutions and commitment go by the wayside. As Christians, our plan is receiving God’s help. Of course, to do that, we have to make ourselves available to God through the sacraments, Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, Christian fellowship, and Christian service. Those are the ways God can fortify us for the struggle against sin. Receiving God’s help isn’t just a one-time baptismal-day event. Receiving God’s help is a spiritual discipline that we should practice every day. Our reaffirmation of baptism is an on-going commitment to seek and accept the strength that God has readily available for us. We improve our lives by receiving God’s help over and over again.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since I began this sermon with a joke, I might as well end it that way too. This is a story about some parents who brought their child for baptism.

Before the worship service, the priest approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism of a child is a serious step. Are you and your wife prepared for it?"

"I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers, and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests."

"I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean, are you prepared with your spirits?"

"Oh, sure," the man replied. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."<sup>1</sup>

I think that scenario might more likely occur in a state other than Utah and in church other than United Methodist, but you never know. People have some strange ideas about baptism.

What I want you to hear from me today is that baptism is an opportunity to belong to a family of faith, to choose to turn away from sin, and to receive God's help. We will definitely improve our lives through a consistent and daily discipline of reaffirming these aspects of our baptism.

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<sup>1</sup>These jokes have many variations and are from unknown sources in the public domain.

<sup>2</sup>No author is known for these lyrics. They are in the public domain.

<sup>3</sup>Baptismal Covenant, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UM Publ. House: Nashville, 1989), pp. 33-54.