

‘Sacrament of Baptism’
January 7, 2018

Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
based on Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11

Both of our scripture readings today come from the beginning of two foundational Books of the Bible. Genesis ... and the oldest Gospel: Mark.

One reading is about the beginning of creation; and the other, the beginning of Good News.

In both instances scripture tell us God marked the beginning of something new with an event. In Genesis it was the creation of light ... and in Mark, it was the creation of grace, bestowed at Jesus’ baptism.

At Jesus’ baptism it was the blessing of grace that would mark the beginning of a new world order.

Do any of you play golf? Or have played golf? Maybe know words like: par or handicap, or maybe you recognize names like Tiger Woods or Arnold Palmer?

I’ve known golfers who use a game of golf as a substitute for going to church with the claim: “I can worship just as well on the golf course as I can in church.”

Well ... I don’t know about that. (ask me again someday after I retire)

While I don’t think those golfers I know are anti-church, I do think golfers (for the purpose of this argument) are susceptible to suspicion.

In the spirit of grace and sportsmanship, let’s consider how baptismal theology compares with golf theology.

In Golf Theology:

- We are honor bound to count our strokes. Once a club’s swing reaches a certain arc it counts as a stroke ... whether you hit the ball or not. If it takes you three swings to hit a ball out of the rough ... that’s three strokes.

- o For honorable, rule-following golfers, there is little grace.

- Gimme’s, Do-overs, and Mulligans are deviations from the ethics of golf. We might be tempted to ask for ‘gimme’s’, ‘do-overs’, or ‘mulligans’ as expressions of grace ... but for the avid golfer ... they’re not. Gimme’s, do-overs, and mulligans is cheating.

Golf Theology would argue that golf is as much a game of skill as it is a game of mindfulness and meditation. A good golfer is mindful of creation around them and is tuned to wind direction and angle of the sun. I do not doubt there is much prayer evoked on the golf course.

Maybe that’s why golfers equate golfing with going to church?

But I am sure when the miracle of miracle happens and a golfer sinks an eagle on a par 5 ... the golfer doesn’t get down on their knees and praises God ... but raises their arm in defiant praise and assumes the Tiger Woods pose with a celebratory “YES!”.

In Baptismal Theology grace is primary and there is no substitute for being in community with others who come together in a place of sanctuary to worship and praise God.

By our baptism we are honor bound to dwell deeply in the creation and distribution of grace.

Not because we get to claim a trophy at the end of the day because we kept score how many times we extended grace... but because by grace we acknowledge how we are freely loved and called to freely love.

I'm not sure a die-hard sports competitor would get why grace would be given and received freely. Or how it is that exchange of grace doesn't require a scorecard.

I guess you could say, in Baptismal Theology ...

- God bestows a winning trophy before anyone swings a stroke. When one is initiated into the family of God, there is no need for scorekeepers and 'gimme's', do-overs, and mulligans are not aberrations, but rather expressions of grace.

- In baptismal theology grace rules and the arc of our swing is measured in how much we aim to achieve the common good.

- In baptismal theology God is the one to be praised and our scorecard is automatically graced with a perfect score ... and it is up to us to strive to live into the perfection.

That is why it takes a village ... or an entire faith community to love and support one another to keep faith to the striving.

Here is essentially the key difference between the theology of golf and the theology of baptism:

In the theology of golf the player with the lowest score wins the trophy. The golfer has to **earn** the trophy and the trophy becomes the prize.

In the theology of baptism the player wins the trophy before even swinging a club. Grace becomes the prize.

A good golfer doesn't start out good in the beginning. It takes a lot of practice and determination to be good at golf. That is one thing golf theology has in common with baptismal theology.

Both require effort and dedication.

Casper Green wrote a book called 'Scarlet Letter Bible' and in it he says, "Baptism might just get you wet. Or it might just change your life."

Baptism marks God's new creation in Jesus when the heavens open and the world is invited into a life-changing, new world order. This is a world order where the powerful are made weak; and the poor are made rich; and the lost are found.

When we renew our baptismal vows and recommit ourselves to prayer, presence, gifts, service and witness ... we acknowledge God extends grace for the times we might need a do-over, a gimme, or a mulligan.

In that spirit I offer this prayer as a prayer of repentance, forgiveness and renewal inspired by one of my favorite theologians: PD Prewer. Let us pray:

God our Creator and Savior, we are creatures who need your constant coaching.

Without it we will never completely break free from our scorecards. Our need is not for a quick fix, with cheap forgiveness followed by our pious but impractical good intentions. Rather we pray for an ongoing radical transformation within our deepest being.

We ask for more and more of your saving grace. For the ability to discern our own secretive sins and to muster the desire to sincerely repent. We need a mercy that reaches into those depths where spiritual hungers and secret corruptions coexist. We want you to forgive our self-serving temptations to keep score and free us to freely give.

Please immerse us in your healing waters of love. Baptize us with your Spirit. Let us know that we are truly made in your image and destined for heights more beautiful than we can ever imagine.

We pray this through Jesus Christ, bestow-er of grace, who for our sakes was baptized by water and the Spirit. Amen!

FORGIVENESS

My fellow Jesus followers: dare to be encouraged. Jesus said: "I have come that you may have life, and possess it to the full!" You are not hopeless, helpless, or lost! With all the costly grace of the cross, Jesus Christ sets you free!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

When you take a test at school – then you get a grade.
When you do someone a favor – then they say “thank you!”
When you play a game – do you keep score?

What if we got a grade, and a thank you, AND a perfect score even before we did anything?? The only thing we did was to be born.

Today we heard a story of when Jesus was baptized by John in the river Jordan. When Jesus came up out of the water a white dove rested over him and a voice said, “This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus got a blessing from God before he even starting preaching and healing and loving people.

That’s what baptism is: receiving a beloved blessing from God before we’ve done anything to earn it.

God loves us so much ... that love is given to us from the very beginning ... before we even knew enough to ask for it.

Do you know why we use water in baptism?

- when your hands are dirty, what do you do?
- when your body smells from sweating, what do you do?
- water is our symbol for cleaning a person from head to toe; inside and out; now and forever – to always be a child of God.

GIVE EACH CHILD A SMALL BOTTLE OF WATER