

Rev. Liz Hulme Adam
Tabor Presbyterian Church
June 21, 2020

Romans 6:1b-11
Grown-Ups
Zoom Worship

Erdal and I were living in Morristown, New Jersey, where I served the Presbyterian Church in Morristown. That's where we bought our first home - making us *real* grown-ups, with real confusion about what all that fine print on all those papers meant!

Being grown-ups, we were eating in our grown-up kitchen. We ate the very same meal, except Erdal chose to put his own dressing on his salad and I used the kind that came with the bagged salad. This is a crucial detail in the story.

It didn't take long. Maybe 25 minutes, when a rumble in my stomach, if heard from the outside, might have sounded like, "*Get ready, you are about to almost die.*"

It got real bad, church. For the sake of my dignity, I will spare you the details; suffice it to say that calm, cool, collected Erdal called an ambulance later that night. Baby Hannah was asleep in her crib.

I missed all the excitement of my first time in an ambulance due to the tsunami going on inside me, ravaging my insides and making my outside appearance resemble something from one of those 80s horror films of demon possession.

Dehydrated, I was so cold I could hear the chattering of my own teeth; in delirium, I thought that a few teeth might chip from the intensity of my uncontrolled shivering.

But let me back up, to describe what happened just prior to the ambulance ride. The rescue squad had to get me into the ambulance. In the haze of horror I was able to make out the identity of one of the guys who came to our house: **A teenager from the church I served.** Gulp.

There are times of mortification that you never forget. Embarrassment chisels a neural pathway so permanent that when recalled, takes you right back to the shudder of shame.

In the hospital, as a real grown up, I kept telling the nurse that I needed to get better because that next day I was preaching! How silly and embarrassing it sounds, to say it. Especially because, at the same time, I wondered if I was going to survive. I'm sure I was fine, that I was having an exaggerated reaction, but food poisoning - do not trifle with food poisoning - it is for-reals-scary.

Maybe being a real grown up includes getting real with fragility. Part of the embarrassment of being seen by a teenager was the discomfort at being seen as vulnerable and tragic, when you are supposed to be seen as something else.

Being in the hospital, being dependent on the skill of other people, is an experience few of us would choose, and fewer would repeat, even if we became a bodisattva by enduring it! But when moments of helplessness dip us into desperation, these are moments we can remember our baptism.

Whether we were dipped, dunked or sprinkled, whether a baby, or a grown up, our baptism **means** something. It is not magic. Not a ticket to heaven. It is a ritual, a sacrament, to mark us, not as our own, not just as individuals, but as a community, part of something larger, subject to a reality beyond our beliefs, beyond our fears.

Paul says through baptism we are no longer enslaved to sin. Those are *triggering* words to those who wince at the mention of "sin." But we have to consider sin from a Jewish perspective, the context in which Paul writes. Sin moves us away from God. You could fill in other words, too: sin separates us from love, from each other, from truth. Leads to isolation.

The remedy for sin is not more isolation, more separate-ness; the remedy for sin is connection. Death is disconnection, right? And the more we worry about it, the more desperate and disconnected we become. Baptism has us ritualistically die to all identities that separate, any identity that would confer *less-than status to anyone else*. Through baptism we make a connection to community — past, present and future. We are baptized into a community of connection for the sake of connection.

The nurse, in a gesture of grace, took a cool cloth to my forehead. A reminder of baptism - water used purposefully and reverently. In that moment she became my community, my lifeline out of my closed circuit of aloneness and fear. A connection. Something I couldn't do for myself. Well I could, like I could kiss my own hand, but the point is lost. We need a "we" to be enfolded into grace. I can't get there by myself. I die to disconnection in every moment I remember my baptism.

The nurse took me out of my separation. Through the tenderness of this woman, whether I lived or died, I was back to a sense of wholeness, a sense of belonging — as the late poet Mary Oliver put it, she wed me to my *"place in the family of things."*

The family of things. That's how Mary Oliver ends her poem, *Wild Geese*. It isn't just people who offer us connection. All of creation connects us to connection. Our breath, necessary for the oak tree, and we, as a species, in dire straights without the pollinating bees. *We are part of the family of things.*

Baptism is our way of signifying that connection. In baptism we are one; we don't lose our identity, but neither do we elevate any of our identity markers. In baptism, all that differentiates us — gender, sexuality, nationality, status, health, ability, shade, won't be used to elevate or diminish any of God's people. We are one in Christ. So yeah, sin is separation, and it's sinful to call anyone unworthy of belonging.

When we are desperate, helpless or vulnerable, we will not be able to pull ourselves out of it. I trust that all of us will be met by a connector, a presence, that will assure us of our belonging. When we are baptized into a community, we are baptized into a sense of collective solidarity and accountability, not that we're special or better, but that we need each other, and in that need, we allow helplessness not to shame us but to better connect us. **Jesus says from the cross, "I thirst," connecting to all who thirst.**

Something astounding happened on Monday. A sector of Americans depended on the Supreme Court to decide if they legally belonged, "in the family of things." Neil Gorsuch wrote the majority opinion, and was joined by Chief Justice John Roberts, Jr. In the words of lawyers Joshua Matz

and Robbie Kaplan, *“Gorsuch simply accepts the experience and humanity of transgendered people as a given, affirming their place in our society.”*¹

This is what we do at baptism. We affirm the humanity of all people, regardless, and we put to death a life that would continue to divide people instead of unite them. In life and in death, we belong.

A few years ago at a wedding at the Morristown Church I heard that the former teenager who worked for the Rescue Squad went on to medical school; now, a practicing physician. A real grown-up! I’ll bet he is a gentle and kind doctor, seeing people through their vulnerable moments, helping connect them not only to health, if that is possible, but to a sense that all of life is sacred, and meant for connection.

And one day, like of all us, he will face his own helplessness. In that moment, by God’s grace, I pray he won’t be mortified, but instead receive with gratitude the grace offered to him, connecting him to HIS place in the family of things. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy One,
we give you thanks and praise for fathers young and old.

We pray for young fathers, newly embracing their vocation;
may they find courage and perseverance
to balance work, family and faith in joy and sacrifice.

We pray for our own fathers around the world
whose children are lost or suffering;
may they know that the God of compassion
walks with them in their sorrow.

We pray for men who are not fathers
but still mentor and guide us with fatherly love and advice.

We remember fathers, grandfather, and great grandfathers

¹ “A triumph for ‘textualism’- and dignity, by Joshua Matz and Robbie Kaplan, WAPO, 7/16/20

who are no longer with us
but who live forever in our memory and nourish us with their love.

We thank you for fathers near
Fathers with strong arms
And fathers with feeble knees
Present at table and at bathtub and at bedtime for prayers.
Thank you, God, for fathers near.

We thank you, O God, for fathers far away
Fathers who ache for their families
Fathers absent because of war,
Or disease,
Or despair,
Fathers who are present and absent at the same time.
Thank you, God, for fathers far away.

We thank you, O God, for caring communities
Where mothers fill in for fathers
And fathers fill in for mothers
And grandparents put on the apron and the towel.
Where aunts and uncles, and those who are absolutely no kin at all
Make our communities a home
Fit for habitation.
Amen.

— written by Safijah Fosua. Used by permission.

Benediction for Father's Day
(based on Luke 12, The Voice)

Do not worry about anything in life—
what you'll eat, or what you'll wear.
Look at the birds of the air,
or the flowers in the field.
If God takes such good care of such transient things,
how much more can you depend on God to care for you?
For you have a Savior who loves you,

who knows all your needs.
So don't be afraid.
Instead, live lives of love and generosity,
storing up your treasure in heaven
instead of here on earth.