

“What About...My Decision?”

When we were baptized into Christ, our reality changed. And if you doubt that, hear these words from St. Paul again: **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3-5).**

God is telling us that in baptism we are united with Christ— specifically to his death and resurrection. These are powerful words. And yet they are words that too many Christian denominations simply don’t pay that much attention to, or attempt to interpret away. But Lutherans take these words quite literally. To be baptized is to die—with Christ—and rise again. It’s the link between the here and now and the cross and empty tomb—a tangible means in which God delivers his grace, bringing sinners to new life. And it’s all his work. There’s no decision to make, no special prayer to pray, no giving our hearts to Jesus. As Luther once wrote, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by men, but by God himself.”

But is this the way many of our fellow Christians right here in our own community understand baptism? Sadly, the answer is no. As one local church website explains, “Baptism before personal salvation is not Christian baptism.” In other words, before there’s any talk of baptism, a person must first decide that they are saved. They even have an application people have to fill out in order to get baptized once they make that decision. The first question is “have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” Check yes or no. The last question, by the way, is what t-shirt size would you like?

Now, I know I am walking a fine line here because so many of us have friends, neighbors, and even family members who consider making a decision for Jesus as just a normal part of the faith. The baptism that follows is a good thing, but there's no power in it because it's only a symbolic act of obedience. So one of the means in which God has chosen to make us his people, and to deliver his grace becomes just another thing we do for him. Well, let me tell you something. This goes against the very essence of the Christian faith.

The Gospel, the truth that humanity has been saved from sin and death by the work of Christ alone, and that this benefit is given solely by his grace, apart from any human work, is not just information God offers hoping that it will motivate us to make the right decision. It's his pure and holy gift. So to insist that he needs anything from us in order for this whole thing to work, not only sets us up for failure, it's not biblical.

Now before you think I'm just stirring the pot here, trying to pit one denomination against another, I want to share something with you about my own experience growing up. And it has everything to do with what I thought was my decision. You see, I grew up in one of the well known evangelical denominations. I attended church every Sunday. I was active in the life of the congregation. The services were traditional with readings, choir anthems, and the word of God preached. We even said the Apostle's Creed. By all accounts, I should have been a confident Christian by the time I went to college. But I wasn't. In fact, I had so much guilt, so much shame, so many doubts, that I was ready to walk away.

And while I really didn't understand at the time why I was willing to give up on my faith, it finally started to make sense once I joined the Lutheran Church. You see, I spent most of my adolescent and teenage years hearing the altar call at the end of many of the sermons, encouraging us to come up and make a decision to rededicate our lives to Jesus. And I would do it. Over the years, I bet I went up there at least 25 times. The preacher, you see, was really good at calling us out as sinners. But what he was not that good at was telling us about God's gift of a solution. So, on any given Sunday, if I wanted to get what God was offering, I had

to make that decision on my own. And so time and time again I would do it, hoping that my choice would make a difference. But it didn't. I still fought with my sisters. I still disrespected my parents and teachers. I still had thoughts that I was ashamed of. I still had doubts. I mean, I felt so disconnected from this God who supposedly loved me. So, finally I made one more decision regarding my faith. And it was the decision that it might be time to leave.

Now, please don't hear my story as some kind of warning against the mainline evangelicals. They, like us, confess that salvation is dependent solely upon God's grace through faith in Jesus. The problem, at least in my own experience, was how this grace is actually received. The Word itself is a means in which God delivers his grace and that was certainly present. But even though baptisms were performed and Holy Communion was celebrated, those things were never viewed as a means in which God actually did anything. So, even though the Bible clearly states that "Baptism... now saves you" (1 Pt. 3:21). That "those baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). That in baptism "God has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). That "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are united to his death and resurrection" (Rom.6)...the one thing that stuck in my mind was that in order to get right with God, I had to make that decision on my own. And it didn't work. Because there is no way for an imperfect sinner like me to choose the only one who is perfect and sinless. And yet, through it all, God stuck with me, just as he had promised the very day that he claimed me as his own.

It took a few years, but God working through his Spirit allowed me to finally get it. And when I did, it was truly a life changer. All the uncertainty of what I tried to do on my own was replaced with the certainty of what God had done and continues to do for me— the certainty found in his great and eternal gift of baptism. And I am so thankful.

So, what about you? Maybe you've always known that your decision means absolutely nothing when it comes to the gifts of God. And when sin, death, and

the devil rear their ugly heads, you remember that in the waters of Holy Baptism, God has rescued you, and will see you through no matter what. I hope that's the case for most of you here today.

But I also know that some of you have been scarred by the constant pressure of trying to do it on your own. If that's the case for you, please hear me. Regardless of when it happened, where it happened, or how it happened, if you have been baptized, you have been crucified with Christ in the water, and made alive because of his resurrection. There's no more wondering if you did it right, or believed enough. There's no more questioning if you should do it again just in case it didn't work the first time. Because this is not a decision you, me, or any of us will ever have to make. This is God's gift to us that in Christ he makes the spiritually dead sinners that we are, people who he wants to love! And where do we have the assurance that we are in Christ? We need only look to the place where God himself spoke as the water covered our heads—the place where he claimed us as his own, killing what separates us from him, and making us alive in the risen Lord. It changes our reality, my friends.

So, as I wrap this up, I want to share with you an experience I had couple of years ago that proves just how true this is. I was visiting a member of the congregation who was close to death. Even though she was declining and weak, we still had a wonderful conversation. She told me some things about life. I told some things about mine. We laughed. I shared Holy Communion with her. As I was preparing to leave, I remember looking at her and doing my best to assure one more time that nothing, not even death itself could separate her from the love of God in Christ Jesus. She politely smiled and nodded her head. And then she did something that I'll never forget. She pointed to a little frame hanging on her wall, which held the certificate her parents received the day God claimed her as his own back in 1917. And she said, "Pastor, I'm going to be Ok. I am baptized."

May we all have that same confidence in what God has done for us. **Amen.**