

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church on October 12, 2025,
 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23-C, by the Rt Rev. Gordon Scruton at the
 Baptism of Noah LaMonica & Madison Cook, & the First Communion of Wes & Nola Pavick.

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c, Psalm 111, 2 Timothy 2:8-15. Luke 17:11-19

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Today Noah and Madison's Baptism invites us all to explore the meaning of Baptism. Is Baptism, as some think, just an ancient Christian ritual that doesn't really mean anything or have any practical value for us today? Why do we still practice Baptism?

We still practice Baptism because we want to continue to be followers of Jesus. Before he left this earth Jesus told his followers to carry on his mission by baptizing people into the continuing Jesus Movement in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching people to observe all that he commanded us to do.

So, today, as Jesus taught us, through prayer and the pouring of water, and the vows that are made, the life and love of God the Holy Trinity will flow into Noah and Madison, adopt them into the family of God and mark them as Christ's own forever. They will be marked with the sign of the cross on their forehead giving them a clear new identity. After Baptism, we are no longer just human animals living life our own way. We are now and forever God's beloved children; we look to Jesus Christ as the model, the Savior and Lord of our lives; the Holy Spirit of God now lives within our hearts, minds and bodies to guide and empower us to live as Christ's representatives in the world in this generation. Baptism gives us the goal, the Way, the purpose of our life, our deepest identity, which begins in this life and continues on after we die.

Yet Baptism is only the beginning. At Baptism God plants the seed of God's life in us. And, the seed, the new life of God within us, has to be watered, nourished, and given warm sunshine in order to grow and flourish. Weeds of busyness and distraction will threaten to crowd out the growth of God's life in a person. Invasive, soul destructive pests may drain life away. There are always challenges to the growth of the seed.

Many seeds are planted with great hope and expectation, but they never grow and produce good fruit. Tragically, many people who are baptized never nourish or allow the seed of God's Divine Life to grow and flourish in their lives. They were baptized and may identify themselves as Christians. But they have not persisted in living the way of love with God and their neighbors that they promised in their Baptism. It takes a lifetime of practice to learn to live the quality of life Jesus created us to live. We learn, and fail, and begin again, and fail; and God is always with us, eager to help us learn how to depend more on God to guide our lives, and show us how to live God's way of love, like Jesus did.

Madison and Noah's baptism invite us all to check in with the Spirit of God who was given to us in our Baptism and reflect on how we are living as followers of Jesus at this time in our lives?

Let's imagine for a moment, that Jesus has just showed up here and is asking to talk with me or with you briefly about how we are living the vows we made at our Baptism. What might that conversation be like?

Since Jesus loves us unconditionally, I imagine that Jesus might begin by affirming a list of what he appreciates about each of us, about our character, our words and actions. We'd be

grateful to hear that Jesus knows all about us and appreciates some of what he sees. Then Jesus might point out a few next steps he'd encourage us to take to improve our relationships with God, with our families, colleagues, and neighbors, with people in our Nation and World. We would probably experience God's energy of love and notice that God never forces or intimidates us, yet is always inviting us to stay more open and responsive to the Spirit of God who dwells within us and around us.

People often asked Jesus, what does God expect of us? Jesus answered by quoting what he had learned in the Jewish Scriptures: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbors as yourself."

Most people then and now find that sometimes it is difficult to love our neighbors. Yet Jesus insists that love must be our priority. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches, "You have heard it said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:43, 44) Jesus has an extraordinary expectation, inviting us to live that quality of Divine love which God created us to live.

Jesus constantly taught people to practice this quality of love and he constantly demonstrated it, as we heard in today's reading from Luke. When Jesus came near a village, 10 lepers approached him. In those days, the term leprosy included many kinds of skin diseases. Lepers were social outcasts. They were considered contagious so were exiled from their homes and families and shunned from all the activities of village life. They couldn't shop in the market, hold a job, touch or come close to talk with anyone. Because people feared them, they had to live outside the town and from a distance they begged for scraps of food. Usually people ignored them, but some yelled degrading insults and even threw stones at them.

In today's reading, the lepers were careful to keep their distance from Jesus as they called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us, help us!" Notice, Jesus stopped to listen to them. Instead of ignoring them, treating them as outcasts and despising them, Jesus went against the social norms of his society and lovingly responded to their request. He told them to go and show themselves to the priest, who could certify that they were clean and no longer had leprosy. Then they could return with joy to normal life. It was not an instant healing. They had to trust and follow the guidance of Jesus. As they did what Jesus told them to do and headed to see the priest, they were all miraculously healed.

Perhaps Jesus is inviting us to ask, who are the people in our current society and world who are considered dangerous enemies to be shunned and rejected from our society? Who are the kinds of people you and I personally try to avoid, the people we think are worthless and dangerous and ought to be removed from our society? Jesus invites us to ask these uncomfortable questions. And Jesus shows us how he chose to love people who were considered outcasts and enemies.

After the healings, Jesus noticed that one of the lepers ran back to thank Jesus for healing him and that man was a Samaritan. Samaritans were despised enemies of Jewish people. They lived in the same country, but in a separate section which Jews usually avoided. Samaritans were often ridiculed because of their different race and religion. They were rejected, ignored, considered unworthy to be spoken to or interacted with.

Jesus asked the crowd, where are the other nine? Is this despised, social outcast Samaritan, the only one who returned to give thanks for his healing? Perhaps Jesus was pointing out to the crowd, that sometimes people whom they despise, fear and avoid may actually demonstrate more courageous faith in God, more deep gratitude to God for God's blessings than self-identified religious people who take God's blessings for granted and race on through their self-absorbed lives. What a challenging thing for Jesus to say. No wonder political and religious leaders wanted to get rid of Jesus. His way of radical love upset their comfortable scapegoating of some people in their society.

Yet Jesus kept practicing his radical love, even as he hung dying, in great pain, on the cross. Jesus looked out at the whole crowd who were gathered there: at the leaders who unjustly rigged a trial to condemn him, and at soldiers who nailed him to the cross, at the crowds who had yelled "crucify him" and were continuing to mock him, and at his disciples who had denied knowing him and abandoned him. In that moment, just before his death, Jesus cried out for all to hear: "Father forgive them all, for they don't know what they are doing." At the most vulnerable and painful moment of his life, Jesus models for us the love at the heart of God for all of us, with all our imperfections, and demonstrates the quality of love God invites us to practice as his followers.

Obviously, this radical love of Jesus is humanly impossible for us to live. Yet, wouldn't we all like to live in a society where everyone loved each other, treated each other with respect, were eager to help each other? None of us have the capacity to live Christ's love on our own. We are sinners, which means we are less than what God created us to become. This way of love is not a do-it-yourself project. We need to keep asking for God's Spirit of love, which has been placed in us from our baptism, to help us day by day, so that we can keep learning to live at least a little bit more like Jesus and his way of love for all people.

This is where Wes and Nola and Madison's First Communion is important for them and all of us. At the last Supper, Jesus took bread and wine, blessed it and gave it to his disciples saying, this is my body and my blood which is given for you. Keep doing this, receiving this gift, in remembrance of me. Through the consecrated bread and wine, the very life and Spirit of Christ flows into us, like a transfusion of Christ's life-blood, to help us become more alive with Christ's life and love, which can then flow out through us into the people and challenges we face in our daily lives. It is not just our limited human love and efforts, but Christ's divine love flowing in and through us to make this world a better place, more as God intends it to become.

Let's close our eyes: I invite you to reflect in silence about what you have just heard... Has anything surprised or helped or frustrated you as we have reflected on Baptism and today's Gospel reading?... What might God be inviting you to think or do differently this week so Christ's love can flow more freely in and through you, making the world more like God created us become?...

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(BCP p.833)