

**Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17 B) September 1, 2024 jj
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King David prays in his psalm of repentance, “Wash me thoroughly from the stain of my iniquity! Cleanse me from my sin! Lord, only You can purge this evil from my heart, and so I would be truly clean! Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow!” And indeed, God did all those things for Israel’s monarch who fell into a plethora of sins, broke all of the Commandments, and yet was restored through the Lord’s abundant grace. But those requests were not only granted to King David. They are answered for you, too, and for you, it’s in an even better way through Baptism. With mere water, combined with the simple-looking, yet very powerful Word of God, you also have been washed, sanctified, armed with strength against this present darkness, and made a member of a spiritual Israel. You belong by Baptism into a holy nation, God’s unique people, who now have not been limited to a certain physical boundary, nor characterized by any ethnicity or out-ward distinction. You belong to a unified people, the Baptized assembly, a heavenly association over which the angels rejoice and gladly attend to your protection from the evil one.

Moses wrote, “What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is near to us?” That means the Lord your God is near to you, too, dear baptized Christian. He has not only wiped your slate clean and given you a fresh start—thanks be to God that you have that! But His gifts only start with forgiveness—there’s even more He gives you! All by Himself, on His own initiative, He has chosen to be the God who is near to you, to give you privileged access to Him. No barrier can separate you from the Love of God that is yours thanks to Jesus and all that He did for you. That access is a precious gift, more to be valued than any other possession on earth, and a greater status than all the honors of the world stacked

end-to-end. You could do nothing to earn it, yet together with the washing at the Baptismal font, where water and God’s Word intersect, it’s all yours.

Every baby that is baptized gives you, the people of God, a window into your own spiritual condition. Like little Sylvester who has been brought into the church family today, there was nothing you could do for yourself to enter into God’s favor. He has to rely on his parents and sisters for practically everything in his bodily life, at least for the time being. You have an even greater inability to stand up, or even keep your head up in the midst of all that you wrestle against in yourself and in the world around you, not to mention to withstand the deceitful schemes of the devil. But in that very same weakness, the Lord was pleased to come near to you, to wash you clean, to clothe you with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ your Savior, and to place His whole armor on you to protect you unto life eternal. Baptism, following the rest of King David’s psalm that we sing in our liturgy, creates in you a clean heart, and renews a right spirit within you. Rather than being cast out away from His presence, you have the promise of the Holy Spirit to dwell within you as in His holy temple. Those evil things which defile a person, as Jesus listed out for His listeners, have been surgically removed and in their place are now the gifts of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control.

Just as Sylvester will still need lots of nurture and nourishment following his own birth, you too, dear baptized into Christ, will need to continue in your Lord’s Word. You need constant meals from Jesus, who last month we heard Him refer to Himself repeatedly as the Bread of Life. You need to rely on the heavenly

angels to guard you in all your ways, and you need the earthly angels, that is, the men who are called and ordained messengers of God's law and gospel, to preach and proclaim forgiveness and the holy way of the Lord so that this treasure remains your most prized possession.

No one dare take these gifts of God for granted, like the followers of Moses did through all their wandering around in the wilderness. Do not be drawn away after other gods, that is to say, other promises not from God that attempt to give you another way to happiness and fulfillment. Your baptism lays out for you another way, the one way of generous abundance, better than the land flowing with milk and honey, a greater Promised Land unlocked for you by the parting of the Jordan River of your baptism, and Jesus, the better Joshua leading the way through the path of forgiveness toward your ultimate goal, your body's resurrection and the life everlasting.

Until that time, Baptism gives you more than enough to equip you and place you within your unique place in this world to bear witness to the Lord who washed you clean and made you His own. As a child, you obey and honor your parents in keeping with the fourth Commandment. As subordinates, you respect those whom God has given temporary authority over you. As those with authority, you don't abuse it as though it were your own power, but always understanding that by leading and instructing your children and those under you, you serve. And though now, according to Jesus, there's no such thing as unclean food anymore, still you nourish your heart and soul with the pure food of His Word, and you hunger and thirst for His flesh and blood, for that alone is the food that will last and will nourish you in the new life that Baptism gave you and continually renews its gift of forgiveness within you. Rejoice, children of the Lord, for you have the God who has come near, through your Baptism. "Peace be to you, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible." (Ephesians 6:23-24)

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.