

Homily at the Baptism of Mackenzie Lee Taylor

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. (The appointed readings for Year B, RCL, are not referred to in this sermon.) February 4, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

I have a standard four-point way of talking about baptism. It's time to bring it up again because Mackenzie Lee Taylor is going to be baptized this morning at Our Saviour. Having achieved the immense age of nine months, Mackenzie is not able to commit herself to the glorious transformation and the holy responsibilities that come with baptism; however, through a commitment of faith, hope and love, her parents, her sponsors (or godparents) and the rest of us are ready to make a baptismal commitment on her behalf. And as we do so we will review what baptism means and recommit ourselves to living into this ancient sacrament, this means of grace instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The four points I use to talk about baptism have to do with its *effects*, that is, what it accomplishes as a means of grace to transform a human life and, through that life, the whole of creation, according to the righteous and merciful love of God Almighty.

The first effect of baptism is **cleansing**. Baptism is a ritual in which the power of water to wash things clean is important. Such rituals are called lustration rituals from an old Latin word for purification. Mackenzie needs to be cleansed, purified, made clean because (even though she has not lived in this world very long) she, like all human beings, has been affected—we might even say *infected*—by the sinfulness that distorts creation. It takes the power of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross to return any human being's nature to the undistorted purity God intended for it from the beginning.

The second effect of baptism, for which we use words like **renewal, regeneration and rebirth**, follows from the cleansing just described. Cleansing suggests washing; renewal, regeneration and rebirth suggest re-creation or re-making. Following the pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection, the old self dies: it drowns in the water of baptism and rises from the water to a new and better way of being alive. We are not just purified through baptism; we are improved. It is as if the same process did not merely clean an old, tattered shirt but went on to repair, restore, recondition, and reconfigure

that shirt to better than new. This is the spiritual reality of which the advertising slogan “new and improved” is but a pale imitation. And, to complete the metaphor of infection I used to describe sin, we could say, as the great Christian writer C. S. Lewis did, that through baptism we are dis-infected from sin and re-infected with a “good infection” called holiness, shared with us by God himself through Jesus Christ.

The third effect of baptism is **incorporation**. People are baptized one at a time, each one individually following the pattern set by Jesus himself, but the baptized individual then becomes part of the Christian community. This amounts to a ritual of **initiation**, the type of ceremony by which a person’s membership in a group is affirmed. The newly baptized person is welcomed into the fellowship of all people, of all times and places, who have had this life-renewing experience. Baptism will incorporate Mackenzie into the body of Christ, making her a member of the communion of saints and eligible to receive Holy Communion at the Lord’s Table as soon as she is able to do so in a seemly fashion.

The fourth effect of baptism is **commissioning and empowerment for ministry**. Baptism goes beyond the cleansing, regeneration and initiation of an individual; it gives that individual a job in his or her new situation. I like to say it this way: you don’t just *become different*; you become empowered to *make a difference*. When our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized, he did not need cleansing, because he was already free of sin. He did not need regeneration, because he was already the Son of God and as full of holiness as a human being could ever need to be. And he did not need incorporation, because he had already been incorporated into the fellowship of God’s people eight days after his birth through the Jewish initiation ritual of circumcision. But it was after his baptism that he began his public ministry which, brief as it was—only a few years—was the time when he made the biggest difference any job of work ever has made. So even Jesus seems to have needed commissioning by the Holy Spirit. Or at least he accepted it as “fitting” (to use his own term). (See Matthew 3:15.)

So we are not just renewing the brokenness of Mackenzie’s human nature and improving her spiritual possibilities; we are giving her a job of work. She is being called to live into her regenerated life in such a way that she helps heal and renew the life of the whole world. Today we will perform the ancient baptismal ceremony that will start Mackenzie on a journey that goes on forever, and what she is going to need from us is consistent, prayerful help in forming her heart and mind—her faith and character—as a disciple of Jesus Christ. She’s way too young to get her intellect around all this baptismal theology, but she’s not too young to begin to learn faithful Christian living by word and example. It’s up to us to be vehicles of God’s grace to support Mackenzie in her formation as a disciple of Jesus within the context of Christian faith and practice—as we in our turn

were formed.

Every time we raise a new Christian from the waters of baptism, we have an opportunity to reflect on our own life as cleansed, renewed, incorporated, commissioned and empowered Christians: members of the Body of Christ, members of the communion of saints. All of us leave wet footprints, for we are drenched in God's grace. May those footprints show us walking the path of Jesus.