

“Every soul that is born into flesh is soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin. . .

In the Church, baptism is given for the remission of sins, and, according to the usage of the Church, baptism is given even to infants.

If there were nothing in infants which required the remission of sins and nothing in them pertinent to forgiveness, the grace of baptism would seem superfluous.” (Homilies on Leviticus 8:3 [A.D. 248]).

This was written by one of the earliest church theologians, Origen, in AD 248.

If you didn't quite understand his words, what he said was that all souls need to be baptized because we are born into sin and need to be cleansed of it, through the sacred rite of baptism.

Even infants must be baptized because they too require the remission of sins because there are things in them, which are pertinent to forgiveness.

Now, you might take issue with this, you might not agree with it, but I bet that for most of us, this is not the first time we are hearing this theological interpretation of baptism.

It's a common one that many Christian communities subscribe to, we must be baptized in order to be cleansed of our sins, we are broken and must be made right through new life in Christ, symbolized by baptism.

Well, truth is, I don't subscribe to this belief.

I believe that humans are inherently good.

We are born good, and as we grow up and go about our lives, that's when we stray from our goodness and commit sins.

But I don't believe we are born stained.

And, personally, I don't see how anyone could ever hold a newborn baby and say that they are anything other than perfect.

There is nothing sinful about a baby, they're good and pure.

Sin doesn't begin with babies, it begins when we grow up, and through our own actions, stray from our inherent goodness.

When Jesus was Baptized, God said to him, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1: 11)

Now, I know we are not Jesus, but we too are beloved.

God is also pleased with us, God made us and called us good.

And throughout his life, over and over again, Jesus called people good in his ministry.

By sitting with them, eating with them, healing them, Jesus was telling them that they were worthy.

That they mattered. That he saw them for the fullness of who they were.

They were not soiled by the filth of wickedness and sin, they were good. As are we.

I want to tell you a story about a woman named Fayette, and how she came to believe this sacred truth, that she is good.

“Years ago, this woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home.

She joined the new member class at Hobson.

The conversation turned to the topic of baptism and their pastor, Janet Wolf, said that baptism is, “this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone.”

During the class, Fayette would ask again and again,

“And when I’m baptized, I am...?”

“The class learned to respond, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’”

‘Oh, yes!’ she’d say,” and then they would go back to their discussion.

Finally, the day of Fayette’s baptism came.

This is how Pastor Janet describes it: Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, ‘And now I am...?’

And everyone sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’

'Oh, yes!' she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later, Pastor Janet received a phone call, and this is how Janet describes the experience,

"Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital.

So I went.

I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth.

When I got to the door, I heard, 'I am beloved....'

She turned, saw me, and said, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and....'

Catching sight of herself in the mirror—hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and...'

She looked in the mirror again and declared, '...and God is still working on me.

If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!" ("Epiphany 1: Baptized and Beloved," www.paintedprayerbook.com).

We are beloved, just as we are, and there is something revolutionary and counter-cultural in naming that, because society at large spends a lot time, energy and money trying to tell us that we are not good enough as we are.

We are too busy or too lazy.

Too devoted to parenting or too devoted to career.

We're too outspoken or we're shamed for not speaking up.

We are too fat or too skinny.

We are too poor and then chastised for having too much money, too many possessions, and so were told to simplify our lives.

It's enough to make your head spin.

But the sacrament of baptism puts on the brakes and says, "Stop. You are beloved just as you are."

As I say at every baptismal service, *"At this very moment, and at every moment in time, God's spirit, God's breath, is with you, for you too are a precious child of God who is loved and blessed."*

Being baptized calls us to live in this counter-cultural way in this real, gritty world.

I know that the sacrament of baptism can feel ethereal.

We say that it's an outward sign of inward grace and we aren't sure if anyone really knows what that means.

But we do know what it's like to embrace our belovedness in this messy and broken world, in the here-and-now, with something as tangible and as elemental as water.

The Spirit is always tied to the material- real water, real bread, grape juice, beautiful baptismal dresses for our children.

Baptism is a bizarre combination of spiritual and material and so often we focus on the spiritual, and we ignore the material.

The problem is that I think if most of us were honest, we'd confess that we don't really understand the spiritual part of baptism and so we tend to forget about it, after we, or someone we love, gets baptized.

It is my hope that if we also remember the material, the relevance of our baptisms in this world, then maybe it wouldn't seem so inaccessible, so other-worldly, and unfortunately, so forgettable.

Remember, baptism names us as beloved, just as God named Christ as beloved.

Baptism claims us, says, yes, you are good, and you have something to offer.

But you aren't off the hook, you have to offer the world that which God has blessed you with.

Now, I know that living in a counter-cultural way can be exhausting and it can feel like you're climbing uphill and going nowhere.

It can be easy to give into temptations to be better in all those superficial ways- like appearance and wealth and job status- because then at least you'll experience some societal affirmation!

Man, affirmations are tempting, for those of you who are on social media, we love those “likes” on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Affirmations are great, but they're fleeting.

Baptism goes further, to acceptance.

“Baptism offers us the acceptance, not merely affirmation, of the Creator of the Cosmos and thereby empowers us to accept others in turn.

Baptism reminds us that wherever we may go and whatever we may do or have done to us, yet God continues to love us, accept us, and hold onto us. (“Baptism of Our Lord B: Baptism and Blessing.” www.DavidLose.net).

So if you ever feel like living in the way of Christ is hard, like being on stormy seas or churning waters, remember that you are never alone.

Not only does God abide with you, but a whole worldwide community of other baptized Christians are partners in the struggle, with you.

Being a baptized Christian can be risky, after Jesus was baptized, he immediately went to the desert and was tempted by Satan.

Hopefully most of us don't have such a rough start to our new life in Christ, but nobody ever said the path was easy.

And while it can be challenging, it's worth it because it will give you more gratification than anything else.

Jesus wouldn't have allowed himself to be tempted and tortured if it wasn't worth it.

But he knew that something greater was on the horizon, because right after that, he began his ministry.

He began to heal, to hold, to know people deeply as they were, not as society thought they should be.

My friends, there's a whole messy transcendent part of baptism that's sacred and hard to understand.

But there's also a very real accessible piece to it too, that we are called to claim our goodness, in the ordinariness of this material world.

So go forth, knowing your worth, sharing that with the world, and share it with others.

Because God loves us exactly as we are, but God also loves us too much to let us stay that way. Amen.