

Teach Your Children Well

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on January 24, 1993 on the baptism of Hannah Smith, Steffen Christos, and Blaire Hastings. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 28:16-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I was fresh out of seminary and the assistant Pastor in Portsmouth, Ohio. An elder in the church took me down to the levy on the Ohio river just a few blocks from the church. He pointed across the river to a place on the Kentucky shore. "That was a station on the underground railroad that led slaves to freedom," he said. He added, "You know those old Negro Spirituals that sing about Egypt, Pharaoh and Moses? Well, those slaves weren't singing just about what God did long ago and far away. They were singing about what God was doing here and now to set his people free. The Ohio River was their Red Sea through which God led them out of slavery into freedom."

The water of baptism is our Red Sea. Just as God led his people from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea just as fleeing slaves found their freedom across the Ohio River on their way to Canada, God leads us out of slavery, into freedom, through the water of baptism. Obviously, a little water on our heads doesn't save us for all eternity. But when my parents brought me into the church through baptism on Easter Sunday in 1945 I was saved from a lot of temptation and sin that might have otherwise enslaved me; not of course just by the mere act of baptism, but also as they taught me to obey all that Jesus commanded. That doesn't mean that I didn't manage to sneak back into Egypt to sin. I did. And I did some really bad things. But I was saved from slavery and bondage to some of the worst things because my parents brought me through the waters of baptism into freedom and God's family where I was taught to obey all that Jesus commanded.

Many Christians, unfortunately, leave their children in Egypt. They say, "We'll let them decide for themselves when they get older whether or not they want to go to church and

learn to obey all that Jesus commanded. I'm not going to force my faith on my children." Baptism doesn't do anything for our children if we have that attitude. If Christian parents, along with Sunday School teachers and ministers, don't teach our children to obey all that Jesus commanded us, then we're letting them remain enslaved to what the world, the flesh, and the devil teach them. When conscientious believers bring their children to be baptized they're saying, "I want my children to be free. I don't want to leave them in Egypt. I want them to know and obey Jesus Christ. I want them to recognize the ultimate authority that he has in heaven and on earth."

So, through the waters of baptism we carry our children out of slavery and into the freedom of the children of God where they are taught to obey all that Jesus commanded.

But, secondly, baptism is not just an expression of our own private, individual religious preferences; in baptism we are making a political statement.^{Just as the Israelites defied Pharaoh by taking their children out of Egypt, we defy every authority that sets itself above Christ.} Let me explain what I mean.

Not long ago I read an interview with a Lutheran minister from what used to be communist East Germany. The interview must have taken place before the fall of communism because the journalist asked "How do you explain why the churches in communist East Germany^{where religious freedom is curtailed and atheism is taught} are often filled with worshipers, when the Churches in West Germany, where there's much more^{religious} freedom, are nearly empty?"

The Lutheran pastor answered, "In communist East Germany people come to church because it's the one place where we're free to hear the truth. ~~We know that the government isn't telling us the truth about who we are and what our purpose in life is.~~ The government claims to be all powerful. In the church we hear^{The Truth} that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Christ. And when we bring our children to be baptized we're making a political statement. We're acting in defiance of a government that claims to have all authority. The government tells us, 'Your children belong to me.' In baptism

God tell us, 'You and your children belong to me. You've been freed through our Lord Jesus Christ.'"

The pastor went on to say, "The churches in West Germany are empty because you in the free West believe that religion is just a personal preference, a private thing, a matter of one's own opinion, like your favorite ice-cream flavor. You go to church, not to hear the truth ~~about who you are and what God's purpose for you is~~; but because it makes you feel good, and if it doesn't make you feel good, you don't go. And when you bring your children to be baptized you're just exercising your religious preference. We in communist East Germany know that going to church and being baptized are political acts in which we affirm that ~~s//~~ authority in heaven and earth belongs, not to the nation state, but to Christ the Lord."

That Lutheran pastor is right. When we baptize anyone we're making a political statement. We're participating in an subversive act. Like the ancient Israelites who stole their children from their Egyptian slave owners, like slaves who risked their lives by crossing the Ohio River to freedom, we're ^{snatching our children from slave masters and} leading ~~our children from slavery to freedom~~ _{them} when we bring them to the baptismal font and teach them to obey everything that Jesus commanded.

Now, ^{Thirdly,} ~~I want to expand a little bit on what that pastor said about the church being a place where we hear the truth.~~ ^{in baptism we learn the truth about ourselves; we learn who we are and what our purpose in life is.}

A couple years ago, Will Willimon, the Methodist chaplain at Duke University, was invited by a pastor friend to preach in his inner city congregation located in the heart of one of our great cities. The congregation is entirely made up of people who live in tenement houses in that part of the city. Willimon arrived in time for the eleven o'clock service, expecting to participate in about an hour of worship. But he didn't rise to preach

until nearly twelve-thirty. There were five or six hymns and gospel songs, a great deal of speaking, hand-clapping, singing. They didn't have the benediction until nearly one-fifteen. He was exhausted. "Why do you people stay in church so long?" he later asked his friend during lunch. "Our worship never lasts much over an hour."

His friend smiled. Then he explained, "Unemployment runs nearly 50 percent here. For our youth, the unemployment rate is much higher. That means that, when our people go about during the week, everything they see, everything they hear tells them, 'You're a failure. You're nobody. You're nothing because you don't have a good job, you don't have a fine car, you have no money. They see the drug dealers and pimps riding around in big shiny Cadillacs, the epitome of success, and they think that's the way to freedom. So I gather them here, once a week, to tell them the truth about themselves and to get their heads straight. I get them together, here, in the church, and through the hymns, the prayers, the benediction say, 'What you hear all week is a lie. You are somebody. God has freed you. You were washed in baptism, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God. You're a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people! You're valuable to God because God has bought you with a price and loves you as his Chosen People.' It takes me so long to get them straight because the world perverts them so terribly (Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens*.)"

Are we that different living out here in small town, rural Pennsylvania? At school and on the T.V. our children hear, "You're nobody if you don't wear one hundred and fifty dollar Nike Air Jordan sneakers. You're nobody if you aren't good looking and sexy, don't have the right hair style, don't get good grades, aren't good athletes, aren't in the gifted program." And it's all a lie. It's a form of slavery to our culture and advertising industry. It's slavery to let the culture tell us who we are and what our value is.

But through the waters of baptism we hear the truth about ourselves. Once we were slaves, now we are freed. Once we were lost, now we are found. Once we were blind, now we can see. We were dead in sin, but Christ has brought us to life. Once we were nobodies but now we are the children of God. Before we could obey or believe in Christ; before we could speak or talk, God accepted us in baptism as his own sons and daughters. In church, we hear the word of God read and preached and we sing our hymns and pray and celebrate the sacraments in order to hear the truth and get our heads straight about ourselves and about the purpose of our lives.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," the risen Christ says. That means that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. He's the highest authority, not only in heaven, that is, the realm of the religious or the realm of personal opinion, but also on earth, that is, in the world of facts and in the realm of the secular and political.

The Risen Christ says to us: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, when you're tempted, when you're depressed and in great doubt; remember when you have sinned and strayed from me; remember when you're lonely, when you're down and out; when you have disappointed yourself and your loved ones; remember your baptism and remember that I am with you... I am with you... I am with you always, to the end of the age." Amen.

Let us pray: O God our heavenly Father, whose Son Jesus Christ took little ones into his arms and blessed them: we give you thanks that you receive these children into your Church and seal them as your own. Deliver them from slavery to the world, the flesh, and the devil and bring them safely into the freedom of being your sons and daughters. Grant that we, your church may faithfully teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. Lead them through the perils of this earthly life, and bring them in due time to your holy table to receive the communion of the body and blood of Christ, that by grace they may witness a good confession, and persevere therein to the end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.