

The Church of the Holy Cross
October 2, 2011
Stewardship Sunday
The Rev. Walter Smedley, IV

From Grace to Gratitude to Generosity

Today I break slightly from the lectionary because we celebrate six baptisms later this morning/today, and it is worth reflecting a bit on the nature of baptism. We also enter a season in which we think intentionally about the nature of Christian stewardship, or how to consider our finances in the light of our relationship with Jesus.

For me, the awareness of my baptism and my calling as a steward of God's gifts go together, but this awareness, this understanding did not come until recently.

When the priest sprinkled water on my seven-month old self on a Saturday morning in the early 1970's at an Episcopal Church in the suburbs of Philadelphia, that may have been my baptism date. But it wasn't my baptism, at least not in the tangible experience of dying to an old self and being lifted out of that abyss by no strength of my own but by the resurrecting arms of the living Christ. This baptism came ten years ago, in 2001 at the age of twenty-seven, just a few days after the Sept. 11 attacks, when I received the call from my eye doctor telling me that what I thought was the need for eyeglasses was instead a brain tumor attached to my optic nerve and pituitary gland—an area right in the center of the brain. Immediate surgery was the best option, but I could lose my eyesight in one or both eyes, I could lose the ability to speak, and I could lose my life. Even if all went as well as possible, I would likely need to take hormone replacements for the rest of my life. I still remember signing the release form in the case of death. The first surgery went well, but not well enough. There had to be a second one. Second one was unsuccessful in cutting out the tumor. So there had to be a third surgery. This one would be the most dangerous, cutting open my skull instead of making an incision through the nose—a procedure called a craniotomy.

Early Christian baptismal fonts were the shape of a coffin to mark the death and resurrection of Jesus into which we are baptized. The event of surgery was the death part of my baptism: Going into the darkness of surgery for six to eight hours with no control, no knowledge of what the outcome would be. I died to control that morning—there was no choice, I had to. Died to the image I desperately wanted to convey to my colleagues and graduate school professors that I was above the need for help. Died to the Wes I always wanted to be.

Sometime in that season of surgeries, a portion of John's Gospel found me where Jesus says to his followers, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower...Abide in me as I abide in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. If you abide in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, *but apart from me you can do nothing.*"

And all of a sudden my eyes were opened wide, and I could see the illusion I had been living under for my whole life up to that point. You see I thought I was a branch that could bear fruit by itself; I thought I could be a self-made man, strong, independent from everything and everybody and above the fray, the Ralph Waldo Emerson poster child for self-reliance, he who wrote, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind"—words that still crackle with Enlightenment energy. Only my own mind couldn't help me in this case—and the history of the twentieth century shows that the human mind even at its best is susceptible to forces that can twist it and corrupt it.

I thought that to abide in anything but myself would be weak and pathetic. I wanted to be able to say that I had done it, I had succeeded, I had earned the degree, got a job, earned an income—I could really help people, could really heal people—I could follow the commandments and be a

good person—I could succeed in the Christian life, succeed in the rest of my life, the non-Christian life—succeed in keeping the two neatly compartmentalized. Of course I would need God and make a visit now and then, but only like a dentist: occasional and only to tell me I was doing great.

But the truth, truth is that coming out of those surgeries I was weak and pathetic. I was vulnerable. And I did need help: major help, basic help: walking up stairs, carrying a bag, opening a bottle, getting dressed. But in the midst of complete weakness and utter dependency, I was encountered by an amazing force that I can only call grace.

For me, grace came as the gift of sight. This was the resurrection experience of this baptism: being lifted out of death through no power of your own. Here were all these resources, all these willing avenues of God's grace—doctors and nurses, church members, and colleagues, friends and family members, spiritual directors and therapists—even people I barely knew. Here was the church at its most transformative: offering confession and forgiveness, the bread and wine, the Scriptures—all filling me with true bread, living bread, real nourishment—and I had neglected them all, chosen distractions over them time and again, ignored their offer of help and strength and nourishment. They had been there all along but I was blind to them. I had been trying to exist as a branch without a Vine—and I was able to keep grace at bay. But now the floodgates were opened and I could see. For the first time in my life, I could see. There was nothing in myself to boast about—no mental toughness or spiritual discipline or physical strength—but only could I boast in God's grace. Such a powerful force, and yet gentle enough to abide in my fragile frame, my weak flesh, my divided heart.

This was a turning point in my life: a point in which I learned that my body was not my own, but God's; that my true family was the church and the people who serve in it; and that every day I live is a sheer, undeserved gift from God that I can use to do God's will in the world. Here is where I began to learn what it meant that I was one of God's stewards, employed in God's service, called to live in a new, redeemed way: not with resentment and entitlement at all the things I didn't have, but to live with open hands outstretched, with gratitude and generosity.

The truth of baptism is that we are not self-made, but rather we are Christ-made men and women. For the Christian who has received such grace upon grace, the question is not about figuring out how much of my money to give in thanksgiving to God and for the work of the church. The question is how much of God's money will I choose to keep.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.