

Take Me to the Water

Romans 6:1-4, Mark 1:1-8

Center Church, Hartford

July 8, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Rachel Held Evans, in her wonderful book *Searching for Sunday*, quotes her friend Andrew about Baptism: "Baptism is done at the beginning of your faith journey, not in the middle or the end. You don't have to have everything together to be baptized...You just have to grasp God's grace. God's grace is enough." (p. 35)

You don't have to have everything together to be baptized. You just have to grasp God's grace, which is enough.

All our lives, we journey over and over again on the waters of baptism, held by God's grace, whether we are at the beginning, middle or end of our faith journeys. It's summer here, and many of us either already have or will be journeying at some point to be by water: a city pool, maybe, or a river or the Sound, or in my case, first Lake Michigan and then the Atlantic Ocean. I know that most of our bodies are composed of water; it's kind of what holds us together. When we are dehydrated, everything stops working. We lose mental and physical abilities.

I think remembering our Baptisms and living through them does the same thing for our Spirits. When we forget that we are baptized as our faith journey moves forward, we get spiritually dehydrated, forgetting God's grace and the power of the Spirit in the waters.

Today, I invite us to remember. To do so, I'm going to use the adaptation in the UCC Baptismal service of a very old prayer, written by the Reformer Martin Luther in the 16th century. Get comfortable and come now on a journey into the waters once again.

(Pour water) Repeat after me: "We thank you, God, for the gift of creation called forth by your saving Word. Before the world had

shape and form, your Spirit moved over the waters. Out of the waters of the deep, you formed a firm foundation and brought forth the earth to sustain all life."

The Spirit moved over the waters. That same Spirit continues to move in the waters, animating life ever new and fresh. The early church insisted that Baptism had to be done in "living" water, by which they meant water that flowed and so was always being made new. You baptized, where is that Spirit re-creating in you?

(Pour water) Repeat after me: "In the time of Noah, you washed the earth with the waters of the flood and your ark of salvation bore a new beginning."

John the Baptist came bringing a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." After the water of our mothers' wombs, the first water we contact as children is the water of bathing. We associate water with getting us and our stuff clean. To remember our baptisms also means to consider deeply how that living water-Spirit is calling us to clean up our acts every day. We do that in the context of that grace Andrew talked about. We can be honest and turn around from whatever we are dealing with because we are held up like a swimmer in a quiet ocean is held up by salt water. You baptized: what needs cleaning up?

(Pour water) Repeat after me: "In the time of Moses, your people Israel passed through the Red Sea waters from slavery to freedom and crossed the flowing Jordan to enter the promised land."

When Israel was stuck between the sea and the army of Egypt, the water seemed a barrier, not a blessing, but God reminded them that waters can make a pathway to liberation. I can't help but think of those desperate women, men and children crossing over the Rio Grande river or the refugees on flimsy boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea trying to escape violence and oppression. Will God make a way for them to be free? Will those who are baptized recognize others who are in need of liberation and be moved to

help them? If we are somehow enslaved in our lives, the waters of baptism urge us to move in faith toward freedom. I think those waters also urge us to help others be free. You baptized: where does liberation need to come in your world?

(Pour water) Repeat after me: "In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus Christ, who was nurtured in the water of Mary's womb."

In Jesus, God not only swept over the waters, but God became one with the water and blood and bone and muscle and flesh that is us. In Jesus, God is not eternally and unutterably separate from us, but miraculously one with us. When we think we are alone, we are not, for God has been here ahead of us, physically. That's how much God loves us, to squeeze cosmic divinity into Mary's womb in order to try to help us live life abundantly, with joy, with love. You baptized: where is God with you, in our world, right now?

(Pour water) Repeat after me: "Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan river, became living water to a woman at the Samaritan well, washed the feet of the disciples, and sent them forth to baptize all nations by water and the Holy Spirit."

There's that phrase again: living water. Jesus told that woman that if she drank from him she would no longer be thirsty. No dehydration of her spirit. Not just water, though, *living* water. Water-Spirit that moves and flows, that smooths rough edges and breaks through rocks, water that cleanses and ever-re-freshening water that nurtures life of all kinds. That's the water Jesus gave her, that's the water with which Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and told them to go out and let water and the Holy Spirit flow from them to the thirsty, soiled world in need of true freedom. You baptized: don't only drink for yourself, but share. Don't only cleanse your own feet, but reach out to others as well. As Jesus said to the disciples when he washed their feet: "I give you a new commandment; love one another as I have loved you."

At the end of the baptismal service in the UCC, we say this prayer: "Give to the newly baptized: strength for life's journey, courage in the time of suffering, the joy of faith, the freedom of love, and the hope of new life; through Jesus Christ, who makes us one." That prayer continues to apply to us throughout our faith journey. As we sing the hymn now, I invite you to remember your baptism. Come as we sing and touch this water, thinking on all these things. Before you do, repeat after me:

Give to us, your baptized children
Strength for life's journey
Courage in the time of suffering
The joy of faith
The freedom of love
And the hope of new life
Through Jesus Christ who makes us one, Amen.