



northminster presbyterian church

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roswell, georgia 30076

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SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 43:1-7 Luke 3:15-17,21-22

SERMON: Marked By Love (Rev. Susan Haynes)

How many of you have seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* It is a whimsical retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* set in the 1930s Mississippi. Three hapless escaped convicts, Everett, Pete, and Delmar, are hiding out in the woods, running from the law. There they encounter a procession of white-robed people going down to the lake to be baptized. As the people move toward the water they sing, "Let's go down to the river and pray..."

As the baptism ceremony begins, Delmar is overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of this rite. He runs into the water and is baptized by the minister. As he returns to his companions, he declares that he is now saved and "neither God nor man's got nothing on me now." He explains that the minister has told him that all his sins have been washed away. Even, he says, when he stole the pig for which he'd been convicted. "But you said you were innocent of that," one of his fellow convicts exclaims. "I lied," he says, "and that's been washed away too!" Later the three convicts steal a hot pie from a window sill. The one who felt that his sins had been washed away returns and places a dollar bill on the window sill. Remember, this is 1930s Mississippi and a dollar bill could really buy something!

Delmar wasn't made perfect by his baptism any more than the rest of us are made perfect by our baptism. But he was conscious that it was time for him to make a new beginning.

During the sermon today, we are going to focus on the Sacrament of Baptism and what that means for our lives, both as individuals and as members of the Body of Christ, the church. To help us keep our focus on the Sacrament of Baptism, I'm going to move beside the baptismal font. *[Susan moves to the baptismal font.]* Later we will shift our attention to the Lord's Table when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Most of us sitting here have been baptized. Some of us have been dunked, immersed in water. Some of us have been sprinkled, had water sprinkled or poured on our head. Actually, all of us who have been baptized have had an easy time of it compared to those who were baptized in the early church. Did you know that those folks went through a three-year education process called catechesis before they could be baptized? Everyone was baptized on Easter morning as a symbol of rising with Christ and entering into a new life. They walked down several steps into a pool of water and then walked up steps on the other side where a white robe was placed upon their naked body. I doubt they took their baptism for granted.

Our baptism marks one of the most sacred moments in our lives, and in the church's life. Baptism should not be confused with an initiatory ceremony. We aren't joining a fraternity or sorority or the Kiwanis or the Rotary Club. We are becoming a member of the Body of Christ. It is a most holy moment and a moment that will mark us for the rest of our lives. I particularly like the way The Message version of the Bible states what "the voice" said as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, "*You are my son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.*"

By the waters of baptism, we too are *marked by love*. When the waters of baptism flow over us, we, or our parents for those of us baptized as infants, are saying that God has a claim on us; *that we belong to God*.

In the Old Testament scripture that Carolyn read today from Isaiah, we see God making a similar claim about the people of Israel. God, or Yahweh as God was known to the people of Israel, said: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*"

For the people of Israel, this was monumental. I'll spare you the history lesson, but be aware that the people of Israel had been taken by the Babylonians from the land to which they had been led after their captivity in Egypt. Now they are about to return to that Promised Land.

God said to the people of Israel: "*You are marked by my love.*" God said to Jesus: "*You are marked by my love.*" God says to us: "*You are marked by my love.*"

What does being washed by the waters of baptism, being "*marked by love*" mean? Does it mean we make recompense for our wrongdoings, as Delmar did when he placed the dollar bill on the window sill for the pie he and Everett and Pete had stolen?

Yes, it does!

Whenever we have wronged someone and there is some way to "make up" for it, as people who have been washed by the waters of baptism... as people "*marked by love*", we do just that. Being washed by the waters of baptism isn't just about making up for the things we do wrong. It is also about acknowledging and living out in our lives what our baptism allows us to do.

Martin Luther is known to frequently have said out loud to himself: "*I am baptized.*" He constantly needed to remind himself that he was a child of God, washed by the waters of baptism, marked by love, God's love. By reminding himself, he was able to be and do far more than he otherwise would have.

What about us? What does being washed by the waters of baptism, *marked by love*, mean to us? I suspect if I asked each of you what it means to you to be *marked by love*, you would have an answer. I think I know some of those answers.

For one of you it means you were able to turn down a contract that would have given your company additional profits. Because you have been *marked by love*, you were able to tell the person who wanted a kickback for giving you the contract to take a hike.

For some of you it means that you have faced the reality of your addiction, whatever that addiction is... alcohol, food, drugs, sex, pornography, and are seeking the help and support you need. Others of you are feeling the Spirit working in you, nudging you to seek that help and support.

For some of you, being washed in the waters of baptism, being *marked by love*, has given you the strength and courage to face life ending illness and disease, or stand by the side of someone who is.

Last week, Jim shared with those who gathered here for worship some ideas for how we as a congregation might be able to go forward over this next year, claiming our baptisms, showing how we have been marked by love. Don't worry. I'm not going to repeat what Jim said. I am going to urge you, if you have not heard or read what Jim said, please do so. The sermon was sent out this past Friday in our *News You Can Use* e-mail message. If you didn't get a chance to read that e-mail, or don't have access to e-mail, there are some copies of the sermon at the welcome desk. Please take one. If you feel God calling you to respond to anything Jim suggested in that sermon, I think you know what to do.

I want each one of us to fully grasp what it means to us, as an individual and as a member of Christ's church, to be *marked by love*. If I thought it would be an encouraging thing, I would have each of you walk past this baptismal font and I would pour some water over you head, if that would help you to claim what Martin Luther claimed when he said: "I am baptized!"

In a few moments we will shift the focus from this baptismal font to the Lord's Table. We are able to participate in this glorious meal because we have been washed in the waters of baptism, we have been *marked by love*. My hope is that as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we will be nourished so that we can live as those God has claimed as God's own... *as those who have been marked by love!* **Amen.**

Isaiah 43:1-7

1But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 4Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— 7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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