

Grace Made Visible

Today, we are starting a two-week mini sermon series on the sacraments. This might be an unfamiliar word to some of you, which is totally ok! It's one of those churchy words that isn't necessarily used a lot. Sacraments are a visible symbol of something sacred.

The sacraments connect us to Christ. They are signs and seals of our faith and of the covenant that we have with God through Jesus.

Of God's invisible grace and the promise of the forgiveness of our sins.

The sacraments have significance because the Holy Spirit is at work in them. While we may be the ones who are doing the actions of the sacraments, it is because of the Holy Spirit that they have meaning behind them.

Different Christian denominations and traditions have various ideas about how many sacraments there are and how the sacraments are practiced.

But in the Reformed tradition that our denomination is a part of, we have two sacraments: baptism and communion.

This week we are talking about baptism, and next week Pastor Rob will be talking about communion, which is fitting since we will be participating in communion next Sunday.

So, of the two sacraments, which comes first, baptism or communion?

Ideally, you would get baptized before you start participating in communion because baptism is the mark of entrance into the visible church. When you decide to place your faith in Jesus, the next step is baptism because it is a sign and seal of God's covenant with us.

Communion is for anyone who believes in Jesus and is an act that we regularly participate in to remind us of the promise God made when he sent his son for our sins.

Baptism is a one-time act, we do not need to do it again once we have been baptized. Once we are baptized, we then participate in communion regularly to remind us of Jesus' sacrifice and the covenant of grace that we have with God.

However, we are not super rigid on rules like they were in the Old Testament, and if someone participates in communion before they are baptized, it's not a huge deal. We have grace!

Grace is a common theme when talking about the sacraments because it is at the center of the new covenant that we have with God, through Jesus.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we would have God's grace.

So, this new covenant we have with God is all about grace.

The apostle Paul talks about grace a lot in Romans. Chapter 5 ends with a focus on grace, which is then continued at the beginning of chapter 6. This is where our passage today is found: Romans 6:1-11.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

I want to stop there before we continue because there is a lot to look at in these first few verses.

Paul says that we were baptized into Jesus' death. This is the reason that we often do full immersion into the water in baptism. There is symbolism in going down into Jesus' death and then being raised with Jesus by coming back up.

As baptism is the sign of God's covenant of grace and the mark of entrance into the church, this imagery of being buried with Jesus to then be raised with him fits into the idea of starting a new life in our faith.

It is a new starting point for our lives.

Baptism is a symbol of putting off the old self and putting on the new as Paul talks about in Ephesians 4.

We move on from our old sinful ways and live into God's grace and forgiveness.

This is why Paul says that we shouldn't just keep sinning even though we have grace. Because we have died to sin, as Paul says, we no longer are habitually sinning. That pattern has been broken. Our hearts have changed and have turned away from a sinful life.

When we decide to put our faith in Jesus, we have the assurance that our sins are forgiven. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are no longer bound to sin. This is the point Paul is making at the beginning of the passage. Because we have this grace and are free from sin, we are not going to stay in the cycle of sin.

Of course, we are still going to sin. Because we're human and no one is perfect. But we know that we are forgiven. We have come out of that sinful life and now live a life of hope and grace.

We have been changed because of our faith in God and the grace that He gives.

This is what baptism represents.

Let's continue and read the rest of the passage, starting with verse 5.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no

longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Verse 5 gives us hope. That even though we have died with Jesus, that isn't the end of the story.

We are united with him in the resurrection.

We are set free from sin!

In baptism, we are entering into the community of the church by saying in front of the church that we believe in Jesus.

That we want to follow him. That we want to live into the covenant that God has made with us.

We are leaving our old selves behind and will no longer be slaves to sin.

We are saying yes to the grace that God gives us and are being made new.

Something that I love to talk about is community. It is a big part of why I became a pastor and my calling to youth ministry. I love making sure that people have a community that they belong to.

Community is so important for us to be a part of as we grow in our faith. We are not meant to be alone.

Jesus wasn't alone in his ministry. He had the disciples with him the entire time and then sent them out to grow the community.

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus said "go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus told his disciples to baptize people, just as he was baptized, as they were sent out to preach the good news.

Baptism is done in front of our church family so we can commit together to support the new believer and grow in community.

This new covenant of grace that we have with God was given to everyone who believes. These signs of the covenant are done in community because we are a communal people, just like God is communal with the Trinity.

This is one reason why it's important to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus said. It is an action that the entire Trinity is a part of, just as the whole church is a part of it.

While talking about the new covenant, we should also acknowledge the old covenant. Jesus said in Matthew 17 that he didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So, instead of ignoring the Old Covenant, we should look at how it interacts with the new covenant.

The sign of the old covenant was circumcision. Abraham was given the instructions to circumcise all boys to show that they were part of the covenant God made with him.

But when the Holy Spirit came to Gentiles, along with the Jews, this sign was no longer necessary because in the new covenant there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

Paul addressed this in Galatians 3 by saying:

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

With the grace that we have through Jesus, there are no more divisions between Jews and Gentiles. We are all equal in the eyes of God and in the new covenant.

We have been baptized into Christ and so we are included in this promise that started with Abraham.

When we speak about the old covenant and circumcision, we are naturally led to consider infant baptism as well. Though this practice is understood differently across Christian traditions, the Reformed tradition embraces infant baptism as part of our covenant life together.

In our denomination, families have the choice to baptize their children or wait and let them choose to be baptized when they are older and make the choice for themselves.

In Acts 2:38-39 Peter says this **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”**

Peter is telling everyone to be baptized and that the promise, or covenant, includes children as well.

Often in the New Testament, we see entire households getting baptized, which would include children. In John 15:16, Jesus says that “you did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Infants cannot choose Jesus yet, but Jesus has already chosen them. Any child who is a part of the visible church, because their parents are in the church, is included in the covenant.

In our denomination’s constitution, it says that **“In the Baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God’s gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit.”** This ties in directly with Jesus choosing us before we chose him.

As a church community, when a baby is baptized, we then make a commitment to help the parents guide the child in faith as he or she grows.

We make this commitment for anyone who gets baptized. While baptism is a one-time act, there is ongoing discipleship that should happen. We do not just baptize

someone and then call it good. They are now a part of the community and so we should help incorporate them into the community by helping them to grow.

In John 13, Jesus is washing the disciples' feet. Peter responds by asking to be washed all over, but in verse 10 Jesus replies by saying:¹⁰ "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean."

While baptism is a one-time act, remembering it as we watch others be baptized, and through other acts of faith, can help us find our way again when we feel distant from God's promise in Jesus.

I was baptized when I was 2 years old in a Methodist church in Georgia. Obviously, I don't remember it at all; I've just seen pictures of me in this big poofy dress that I couldn't walk well in (because it was the 90's and we were in the south).

But the significance of baptism comes in the work of the Holy Spirit. I don't need to remember what it was like to be baptized to know that I have been baptized and am included in this covenant community.

I'm grateful for the churches I've been part of over the years—they've helped me grow in faith and step into the baptism my parents chose for me. Having family, Sunday School teachers, friends, and mentors who have encouraged and walked alongside me as I learned who God is and what His grace means to me has helped as I continue to grow in my faith.

For those of us in this room, or online, who have already been baptized, this can be a reminder of the community that we are a part of because of our baptism. We can remember that there are people in our community who we can help to grow and live into their faith.

Whether that is a child, teenager, adult, someone in our family, or someone in the next pew over.

We can be reminded that we put off our old self when we died with Jesus, and as we live into the grace we have from God, we can share that grace with others, through the help of the Holy Spirit.

For the people here who haven't been baptized yet, maybe today you've started thinking that baptism is something you want to participate in. Or at least learn more about.

We would love for you to take that next step into deeper community and there are plenty of people in this church who would love to walk alongside you and help you grow in your faith.

Each Sunday, we have the Communion table on one side of the sanctuary and the Baptismal Font on the other. When we see these, we can be reminded of the covenant that God made with us.

That our sins have been forgiven.

That we are a part of this community because of the grace that God has given us.

Let's pray.

Before benediction:

If you have not been baptized yet and would like to, or if you want to have a conversation about baptism, one of the pastors would love to speak with you. Pastor Rob or I are here today for you to speak to, or you can speak to Pastors Brian and Gwen, when they are back from vacation. We also have a sign-up sheet in the lobby if you are interested in getting baptized.