Something in the Water

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 6:3–5
Baptism isn't merely something we do—it visibly declares the spiritual reality that, through faith, we have been joined to Christ. In Romans, chapter 6, verses 3 through 5, Paul shows that baptism is more than a church ordinance. It's a real spiritual union with Christ, where the believer identifies with him in both his death and his resurrection.

Introduction

- Ms. Venetta was a sweet 84-year-old widow at our church down in Newnan.
    - When you walked in the front door, there was a big round welcome desk and you would find her sitting there every Sunday.
    - Her job was to greet everybody and she took it seriously.
    - Whenever there were new people, she would always find me and make sure I knew we had guests.
    - It was really hard to get into church without interacting with Ms. Venetta.
- In January of 2018, Venetta called the church office and said that she wanted to speak to a pastor.
    - Turns out something significant had happened to Venetta.
        - She had been quietly wrestling with something and on that particular day it came to a head.
        - She had lived most of her life under an illusion.
        - She had the same story that a lot of people her age had.
    - She grew up over in the NE Georgia mountains…grew up going to church.
        - Heard the Good News a thousand times.

    - And for most of her life, she was placing her trust in her upbringing, her church attendance, her sweet spirit and kind disposition.
    - But she never truly placed her trust in Jesus.
    - She realized that cold day in January that she wasn't a Christian.
    - So sitting in her living room, she gave her life to Christ at 84 years young.
- Of course, we celebrated that decision with her.
    - She came down to the altar after worship and told the church her story.
    - It takes a lot of courage to reach your 85th year and admit that what everyone assumed about you—and what you had long assumed about yourself—wasn't true.
    - The question invariably came up about baptism.
    - Venetta had a bad back and physically bending for a baptism would have been pretty close to impossible.
    - But she wanted to get baptized.
- So we got on the phone looking for a pool deep enough to baptize her without requiring the kind of bending a normal baptism does.
    - Turns out the local YMCA had a zero-entry pool that was deep enough for us to be able to get her up to her neck in the water.
    - So after church on February 4, 2018…we finished up church a few minutes early and everyone headed over to the YMCA.
    - Me, my associate pastor, and one of our deacons got into the water, helped Ms. Venetta into the water, and we celebrated believer's baptism with a rather frail older lady.
    - The YMCA even let us have their community room for the event and we had a nice lunch as a church family to celebrate Ms. Venetta's baptism.

- If Venetta had decided to not be baptized, I don't think anybody would have said a word.
    - She was 84…frail. There was no way to do it in the church's tub.
    - All of this was too much effort.
    - But in her eyes, it was too important to skip over.
    - And if we could find a way to baptize her safely, she was going all in (pun intended).
- We're in a Baptist church this morning.
    - Baptism is kind of our thing.
    - It is in the name, after all.
    - But what is the big deal about baptism?
- Why would an 84-year-old woman with a bad back go through all that trouble?
    - Why would an entire church leave the building, drive across town, and gather around a YMCA swimming pool?
    - After all, baptism doesn't earn our salvation.
        - The water doesn't wash away our sin.
        - Venetta was saved in her living room when she placed her faith in Jesus—not three weeks later when she stepped into that pool.
    - So why did baptism matter so much to her?
        - Because baptism may not be what saves us, but it shows us what salvation means.
        - It tells the story of what Jesus has done for us—and what has happened to us because we have been joined to Jesus.
- That is where Paul takes us in Romans 6.
- Paul wants us to understand that Christianity is not merely believing that Jesus died and rose again.

    - It is being so completely united with Jesus that his death becomes our death, his burial becomes our burial, and his resurrection becomes the beginning of our new life.
    - There is something happening in the water.
    - Not because the water is magical.
    - Not because baptism earns grace.
    - But because baptism visibly declares a spiritual reality: through faith, we have been united with the crucified and risen Christ.
- Look with me at Romans 6:3–5.

Scripture Reading

Romans 6:3–5 ESV
3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

- As we get into chapter 6, first a word to my note-takers:
    - We're going to skip around just a little in chapter 6…so just know there's going to be some overlap between the next couple of sermons and the verses they cover.
    - I did want to pull out the baptism section and feature it today.
    - So just know as you're taking notes, we'll be revisiting vv. 1-2 next week.
- But this morning, I wanted to specifically dig into the subject of baptism.
    - We celebrate baptism as a church.

- We rejoice every time that tub gets filled.
- But it’s no secret that baptism is one of those issues that truly divides the church and it has for a long time.
- Most of those divides come down to a few questions

- First: Who should be baptized?
  - The most obvious divide is between those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believer’s baptism.
  - Many of our brothers and sisters in other churches, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, baptize infants.
    - They do it out of real conviction, not carelessness.
    - They see baptism as the new covenant sign that replaced circumcision, and just as Israelite boys received that sign at eight days old, they believe children of believers should receive baptism today.
    - They point to Peter's words in Acts 2:39, 'For the promise is for you and for your children.'
  - We'd gladly agree that God cares about families, and that children raised in a believing home are richly blessed.
    - But we'd also read the rest of that verse: the promise is for 'everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'
    - And just one verse earlier, Peter says, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you.'
    - In the New Testament, baptism follows repentance and faith.
    - It's a believer's public testimony that they have died and been raised with Christ.
  - And while we love babies and pray for the day that they will respond in faith to the Gospel, we believe baptism is a response to God’s grace in salvation - and infants and small children simply cannot respond in that way.

- The second question is this: What does baptism actually do?
- There are also real differences over what happens in the water.
    - Some Christians believe that baptism is the moment God gives new birth, that the water is the means by which sins are washed away.
        - They aren't pulling this out of thin air.
        - They point to verses like 1 Peter 3:21, 'Baptism... now saves you,' and Acts 22:16, where Ananias tells Paul, 'Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins.'
    - We take those verses seriously.
        - But notice how Peter finishes his thought: baptism saves 'not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.'
        - It isn't the water that saves; it's the risen Christ, received by faith.
        - It's why the thief on the cross, who was never baptized, heard Jesus say, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'
        - And it's why in Acts 10, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit before they ever touched the water.
        - Peter's response was, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'
        - The Spirit came first. The water came second.
- Third question: In whose name?
    - Then there are divides over the very words we say.
    - When I was in seminary, I worked with a young man who found out I was a pastor and he asked me out of the blue, “What do you say when you baptize someone?”
    - So I told him and he lost his mind.
    - That was the day I learned about a view called “Oneness Pentecostalism.”

    - They believe that you can only be baptized in the name of Jesus, not the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
    - If you were baptized using the Trinitarian formula, then your baptism doesn't count.
    - Now, their reasoning for this comes from a deeply flawed understanding of the nature of God and a heretical rejection of the Trinity, but it shows up most clearly in the doctrine of baptism.
- Finally: By whose authority?
    - And then there's one that's a family fight among Baptists.
    - If you were in a Baptist church 30-40 years ago, then it is likely that you had heard a conversation or two about "alien immersion."
    - If a church were arguing about that today, they could legit be talking about reaching immigrants.
    - Or they could be talking about reaching little green men.
    - Pick your poison.
    - This is an argument among Baptists that probably still has some traction the closer you get to Kentucky.
    - Basically it is an argument about what kind of baptisms "count."
    - Some Baptist churches reject any baptism (even if it was believer's baptism by immersion) if it wasn't done in a Baptist church.
    - As a church, we recognize the validity of believer's baptism by immersion from other gospel-preaching churches, even if they aren't Baptist.
    - Of course, we would want to have significant conversations about other doctrines (My Oneness Pentecostal friend had much bigger problems than the words spoken during baptism.)
- Now, my goal this morning isn't to win an argument.

    - But I do want to take advantage of Paul's treatment of baptism in Romans 6, so we can understand WHY baptism is so significant for us as a church.
    - Because what we will find is that Jesus' command for his followers to be baptized isn't some kind of "church initiation."
    - Nor is it some kind of mystical cleansing.
- In baptism, our union with Jesus is displayed in a way unlike anything else in the Christian life.

In Baptism, We are United with Jesus in His Death (v. 3)

- Paul begins by asking a kind of rhetorical question.
    - "Do you not know…"
    - That means that he's not really introducing a new idea.
    - He is reminding the reader about what is already a settled claim.
    - By the time Paul writes Romans, this notion has already become a settled idea in the early church.
    - Do you not know what?
    - That all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.
- That is a very consequential statement that impacts our understanding of baptism. It also informs our understanding of *when* we do baptism.
    - That means that baptism isn't just obedience to Christ's command (which it is).
    - Baptism isn't just a public affirmation of one's salvation (which it is).
    - That means that when someone is baptized, they're making a much more significant statement than "I'm happy to be a Christian."
    - Before baptism is anything, baptism is a picture of death.
- We've seen baptism dozens of time and it always looks mostly the same.

    - We take someone who is a new believer (sometimes it's someone who's been a believer for a while and they have avoided baptism), we stand in front of the body.
    - They publicly declare their faith in Jesus.
    - And then they submit themselves to the person doing the baptism and they're lowered into the water.
    - Stop right there - that's a statement.
    - It happens fast, but it still happens and it's a profound statement.
- In that half a second that person is saying, "The old me is dead."
    - The old me isn't killed in that moment.
    - The old self died when that person placed their trust in Jesus.
    - But this is the public display of that statement.
    - Paul will say later in v. 6 - "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing."
- Regarding when we do baptism…
    - This certainly shows why we hold that baptism is not something we do ahead of conversion but after conversion.
    - If you practice baptism before conversion, you're declaring something that isn't true.
    - If you're not yet a born again follower of Christ, then your old self isn't crucified.
- Now, don't get me wrong - we were dead too, but that was death because of sin, not death with Christ.
    - Paul makes that plain in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:1–3 ESV
1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins

2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following

the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

- And in Romans 5, he has made it very clear that we are all condemned under Adam's sin.
- For us to baptize someone who isn't born again is a confusing departure from what Paul is saying here in Romans 6.

- This means we need to do our very best to make sure that we're only baptizing born again believers.
  - Because it is only born again believers who can say that their old self has died with Christ.
  - Not that my old self is becoming a better person.
  - But that my old self is crucified in Christ.
- I never want to put unnecessary barriers up around the baptistery.
  - But I do think that this is an appropriate and necessary barrier.
  - Those waters are not for curious children.
  - Those waters are not for people seeking cleansing from their sin.
  - Those waters are not for people seeking to rededicate their lives to Christ after a time of wandering.
  - Those waters are for people to declare "The old me is dead and I am a new creation in Christ."
- So Paul asks the question, "Do you not know…?" and then he proceeds to answer the question in v. 4.

We are Buried, but not for Long (v. 4)

- If the book of Romans is Paul's greatest treatise on the Gospel, his greatest summary of the Gospel is found in 1 Cor. 15:3-4

  1 Corinthians 15:3–4 ESV
  3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,

  4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

  - When we think about the Gospel, we are often inclined to think about Jesus' death, and we are certainly going to remember Jesus' resurrection.
  - But there is an important event that takes place between those two milestones - his burial.
  - It's more than a logistical footnote to the story.
  - For Paul, the burial is part of that "of first importance" statement there in 1 Corinthians.
  - Why?
    - Burial is confirmation that a death has really taken place.
    - You don't bury living things. You bury dead things.
    - There were all kinds of conspiracies surrounding Jesus' death.
    - Some suggested that Jesus just fainted on the cross - no death.
  - Pilate unintentionally did history a favor: before releasing Jesus' body to Joseph, he required confirmation that Jesus had truly died.
    - Then Jesus was placed in a known tomb. Sealed and secured.
    - His burial was not a logistical footnote; it confirmed that his death was real.
  - Jesus really died.

- In baptism, we are united with Christ in death. What do you do with dead things?
    - You bury them…
    - This is why the "how" of baptism matters.
    - We practice baptism by immersion because baptism is supposed to be a picture, not just of the death of our old self, but also the burial of our old self.
    - It is really hard to paint a picture of a burial when you're sprinkling water on someone's head out of a font in the vestibule or when you're pouring water over their head from a cup.
- But why is this so important?
    - For the same reason Paul recognizes Jesus' burial as being of first importance.
    - It serves as a confirmation that a death really has happened.
    - The same is true for you in baptism.
    - When we bury someone under the water, we're making a statement.
    - The old me really is dead. Crucified.
    - It no longer lives. It is in the grave.
- Now, Paul doesn't say this directly, but I think it follows that baptism can't be a private spiritual act.
    - We hold that baptism is something that happens as part of the regular worship and public testimony of the church.
    - Can someone go through the action of baptism in their backyard swimming pool? Absolutely.
    - But if the point of burial is to demonstrate that a death truly happened, who is that proof for?
        - Well, the dead thing doesn't need proof.

        - God doesn't need proof.
        - The church doesn't need proof, but it does need the believer's public testimony.
        - Baptism gives the congregation a visible confession to celebrate, affirm, and help that believer live out.
    - Baptism is certainly a personal decision, but it is celebrated in the community that we call the church.
        - Because it is the church that is going to look at you and say, "Didn't you crucify your old self? Why are you acting like that?"
        - It is the church that is going to oversee and shepherd your walk with Christ.
        - So we believe that this burial is best conducted in public so all will know.
- Going back to Paul's "of first importance" claim.
    - Jesus was crucified and buried.
        - But that's not the end of the story.
        - Because Jesus was raised from the dead.
        - He didn't stay buried.
    - And neither do we in baptism.
    - Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.
- If you buried the dead thing - the only way that circumstance changes is for God to intervene.
    - He did for Christ.
    - And he does the same thing for you.
    - In Galatians 2, Paul said it this way:

      Galatians 2:20 ESV

20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

- When we are born again, there are some dramatic things that happen.
- In Romans, we've been focusing on the legal and spiritual realities of justification.
- The legal demands against us are satisfied.
- But it is more than just a legal decree because there are real changes in our hearts.
- "…the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God." That phrase defines how we live as born again believers.

- When we come out of the water, we're continuing to paint the picture of what has happened in our souls.
  - We've been crucified.
  - We've been buried.
  - And now we've been raised to walk in a brand new way.
- And we're not talking about future resurrection hope yet.
  - This is about hope for today.
  - This is about how we live in this moment.
  - We'll get to future resurrection, but this is about how you live NOW.
- That last phrase isn't about future, it's about now.
  - That…we too might walk in newness of life.
  - What characterizes the life of the Christian?
  - Daily walking in newness of life?
  - Why?
  - Because your old self is dead and buried.

- Of course this isn't about perfection.
    - You're going to mess up.
    - You're going to do dumb things.
    - You're going to stumble.
    - But that is no longer your disposition.
    - Your old self - you excelled at it and didn't mind.
    - Your new self - you want to live a life that is pleasing to God.
- But this isn't just about today…

Baptism points to future hope (v. 5)

- Look at how Paul builds this sentence.
    - "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."
    - That's not Paul hoping. That's not Paul guessing. That's Paul doing math.
    - In logic, we call this a conditional statement
    - If A, then certainly B.
- If we've really been united with Christ in his death — and we have — then we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection.
    - Not maybe. Not probably. Certainly.
    - Here's why that word matters so much.
- We've already talked about walking in newness of life.
    - That's a today word.
    - That's about how you live right now.
    - That's about what this week is going to look like.
    - That's about this moment.

    - That informs this big decision in front of you.
- But v. 5 isn't talking about today.
    - It's talking about a day that hasn't come yet.
    - One day, your body is going to die.
    - And when it goes into the ground, it's going to look like something that's finished.
    - People even call the grave “their final resting place.”
    - Over. Done.
- That's exactly what baptism itself is pretending to be, for about a second and a half.
    - You go under.
    - For that moment, you're gone — out of sight, under the water, still.
    - And then you come back up.
- Paul says that's not just a picture of what already happened at the cross.
    - It's a preview of what's still coming.
    - What's true of the water is going to be true of the grave.
    - You're not staying under.
    - Because Jesus didn't stay under.
- The same God who raised Christ from the dead has already united you to that resurrection.
    - That's already settled. Already secured.
    - Not something you're waiting to find out.
    - That's not a nice thought for people who are anxious about dying.
    - It’s not just salve that we get to apply to grieving souls at funerals.
    - That's a guarantee for people who belong to Christ.

Invitation

- But listen very carefully.
    - It is not the BAPTISM that secures that guarantee.
    - Please don't put your faith in your baptism.
    - My heart hurts for the people who live in the Bible belt who have placed their faith and trust in their baptism.
    - I need you to hear me…
    - Some of you in this room were likely baptized as infants.
        - Maybe in an evangelical church.
        - Maybe in a Catholic church.
        - And you were told that your baptism has secured your place in the church.
        - You might have gone through a class when you were a child.
            - They may have done a ceremony for you in the worship service.
            - You might even have a certificate tucked in a Bible somewhere.
        - Maybe some of you were even baptized, by immersion, maybe you were old enough to remember.
            - You remember the day.
            - You might even remember what you were wearing.
        - But I need you to understand this more than anything else this morning.
- If your faith is in any act, any class, any certificate…
    - If your faith is in any word of promise from a priest or a pastor…
    - If your faith is in anything LESS than the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ…
    - Then your future hope is not secured in Christ.

- Because you never really died to self.
- Listen, the water never did anything.
- Is there something about the water? Yes - the water points to something far greater.
    - It points to our death to sin.
    - It points to life with Christ today and life with Christ for eternity.
    - But it will never save you.
- Your first need is not another trip into the water.
    - Your first need is to trust Christ and let him do what you hoped the water had done.
    - And once you have trusted Christ, then follow him in believer's baptism—not to save you, but to testify that he has.

- Maybe you're here and you've never been baptized.
    - You could be born again and you've avoided it.
        - Why would you avoid that which Christ commands?
        - Why would you avoid the thing that so powerfully pictures what Christ has done on your behalf?
        - Why would you avoid demonstrating the union you have with Christ in his death and resurrection?
        - I know there are lots of excuses.
            - I'm afraid of the water.
                - First of all - we have a 100% success rate of recovering everyone from the tub.
                - But in all seriousness, there are some things we can do to help you overcome that fear but the first step is an actual conversation.
            - I'm afraid of the crowd.

        - Again - step one is a conversation, not avoidance.
        - I’m afraid of crowds too - and I can promise you that the safest place from the crowd is way up there away from all of them!
    - Or maybe you’ve never been born again.
        - That is the first step and I’m happy to talk with you today to help you in that.
- And maybe you’re here and you're already in Christ, and you've already been baptized.
    - Good. Then live like it.
    - You've been crucified. You've been buried. You've been raised.
    - Stop living like the old you is still calling the shots.
    - He's dead. Walk like the new you actually believes that.
- Because here's what's true for everyone in this room: the old self isn't a project. It's not something you slowly improve.
    - It has to die.
    - And on the other side of that death, God has already promised a resurrection just as certain as his.