

## ***“I Promise”***

*Romans 6:3-11*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 2, 2014

The Winter Olympics ended last Sunday evening and I was sad to see them end. I really enjoy the Olympics and for some reason I am especially fond of the Winter Games. I don't know why. I think it's because it is so different than anything I'm used to. Like many of you, I didn't grow up ice skating or snow skiing and so for me there's a certain amount of intrigue involved. Especially in those newer events that involve the trick skiing where they do the jumps and flips. But there are people who learn to do it and they even make it look easy.

One of those people is David Wise who won the gold medal for the half pipe event. Now while his skiing abilities intrigue me, there's something else about him that seems to have intrigued some others. David Wise is 23 years old and is married with a young child. He's also a committed Christian. For most of us that sounds pretty normal, but one NBC sports writer reported, "At such a young age, Wise has the lifestyle of an adult." He went on to describe Wise as living an "alternative lifestyle."

Is this what we've come to? A Christian married with a child is an "alternative lifestyle?" Well the truth is that Christianity is *supposed* to be an alternative lifestyle and for most of the past 2,000 years it has been. Jesus told us to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. We are different. We think different thoughts and we do different things.

Nowhere is that difference more visible, I think, than when we celebrate the sacraments. To someone who has little or no experience with Christianity, the sacraments can seem strange, so let's look at what they are. The word "sacrament," as you can probably tell, comes from the word "sacred," which means connected to God. So the purpose of sacraments is to connect us to God. Saint Augustine, who lived in the late fourth century, said that a sacrament is "a visible sign of a sacred thing." In other words, a sacrament

visibly points to an invisible reality. That reality is the grace of God, working in us. John Calvin said that a sacrament is "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith." So the purpose of sacraments is to confirm and seal the promises of God to us. Calvin compares the sacraments to the official seal on a document, like a notary seal. By itself the seal has no meaning. But when it's affixed to a legal document, the seal confirms that the document is genuine. The elements of the sacraments don't have any special meaning. They are common bread and juice and water. But God uses them to confirm the promises he makes to us in his Word.

In the Reformed, Presbyterian tradition we have two sacraments. Some other traditions have more but we celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The reason is that we understand sacraments to be things that Jesus instituted and commanded all Christians to do. When he instituted the Lord's Supper with his disciples he said, "Do this." The Apostle Paul, in First Corinthians, makes it clear that the command is for every Christian. Similarly, in Matthew 28 Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

The other reason we recognize these two sacraments is that they serve as signs of the covenant. In the Old Testament, whenever God initiated a covenant he also confirmed it with a sign. When he made the covenant with Noah he gave him the sign of the rainbow. When he made the covenant with Abraham, the sign of the covenant promises was circumcision. I imagine Abraham was thinking, "hey wait a

minute. I think I'd rather have the rainbow." And when God made his covenant with Moses, the sign was the Sabbath. When Jesus, who is God, initiated the New Covenant, he sealed it with the signs of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He said, "This cup represents the New Covenant in my blood for the forgiveness of sins."

Baptism is also a sign of the covenant. Colossians 2 says, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism."

That leads us to one of the questions most often asked about baptism in Presbyterian churches: "Why do you baptize infants?" This is certainly an area that has caused lots of disagreement over the centuries between different parts of Christ's Church. The short answer is that it's our way of visually saying that God claims us as his own long before we could ever choose him. Just as God commanded that infant boys be circumcised on the eighth day as a sign that they are part of the covenant community, we baptize infants as a way of saying that God has claimed that child as part of his covenant.

So the foundation of infant baptism is found in the Old Testament. But we also find it in the New Testament. Acts 2:37-39 says, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, '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. For the *promise* is for *you* and for *your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'" Of course those children must still publicly profess their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

With that foundation, let's look at the *result* of baptism, the promises of God. Baptism symbolizes several things. First, the water signifies the washing away of our sins, leading to forgiveness. In our baptism God promises that in Christ we are forgiven. Second, the act of baptism signifies our death and burial. Verse 3 of today's passage says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Baptism is like a funeral for our old sinful self.

Finally, baptism reminds us that death is not the end. Baptism signifies resurrection and eternal life. The passage continues: "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." In our baptism, God makes this promise to us: "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 to say that it's the baptism itself that guarantees that eternal life. It's the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that does that.

If God is working in your life it's going to show. It's going to show by coming to worship and participating in a Bible study. It's going to show in connecting with other Christians for fellowship and support. The work of the Holy Spirit in your life is going to show in your desire to serve other people. In other words, the evidence for the ongoing work that was started in you with your baptism, the evidence that God's promises have taken root in you, the evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life is an alternative lifestyle.

*Amen*