

We have a running joke in our family during vacation.

How many showers are we going to take while we're gone? The answer is, "As few as possible." We treat ourselves to a break in the routine. No alarm clock, no rush to get dressed, coffee first (and second and third), and if we can help it, no bath. I actually went four days on our last trip without shaving. My poor, tired face was so grateful.

As blessed as it is not to bathe every single morning, you can only go so long before the need catches up with you. We don't want anyone else to experience what our noses are telling us. So, we decide to get clean. They say that if a person can go for a month without washing his hair eventually the oils will quit producing and his scalp will lose its, uh, fragrance. But I've lacked the courage and discipline to find out. I need a bath more often than that. I've also heard about something called dry shampoo, another creation from the world of science to help us avoid the hassle of hair care. But I don't know. Using dry shampoo sounds to me a lot like swimming in a sandbox. I guess it could be done, but I wonder about the results. There's a time to let go of personal hygiene, just doing the minimum to get by; and then, there's a time to clean up.

It was time to clean up in Israel. Everybody knew this. It wasn't a secret. So when the people heard about John baptizing in

the Jordan River, they came from all over the hills and countryside to wash off the muck. They came to be free from their sins. I would tell you John was washing their souls instead of their bodies, but that would be too easily misunderstood. It wasn't just a part of them John aimed to wash. John cleaned them from top to bottom. Their hands got washed for all the troubling things they had done, and all the noble things they had failed to do. John washed their heads, which were full of impure thoughts and attitudes, and their hearts which were covered in secret shame and guilt. The people needed to clean up *their entire lives*, the whole of their individual and collective histories. It had been a while since the last shower, and they were beginning to stink to high heaven. So when they heard about John and the water and the forgiveness of sins....

All of us know that we are sinners. We don't need convincing. Our memories remind us on a regular basis. Man, the things we would take back if we had the chance. The good we wouldn't neglect if we could go back in time. The words we would never say or make sure we said, but the clocked has ticked, and we are covered in the knowledge of our moral failure with no way to escape the truth of our past. Our understanding of sin's nature and how we participate in it may need to grow, but we already know enough to know we could use a good bath,

something to make us feel clean and fresh again in spite of all we've done wrong. What time is it? Is it a time like Israel's when the cleansing word of God came to John? Is it bath time for us?

Our reading points beyond the baptism of John to the baptism that will follow on the heels of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus is different from the baptism of John. Jesus, as far as we know, didn't baptize anyone. Yet, he charged his followers to make disciples all over the world by baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We don't hear anywhere in the New Testament that people were baptized into John, but that's exactly what we hear about the followers of Jesus. They are baptized into him, and become one with him in baptism. That means, miracle of miracles, that the gracious words God spoke over Jesus in his baptism ring in our ears, also. We are God's children, too, beloved sons and daughters, with whom God is well pleased. And in case we have a hard time believing it, the Spirit descends with the water to confirm in our hearts that indeed God loves us with the same intensity and commitment by which God loves his blessed son Jesus. The baptism of Jesus goes farther than the baptism of John. It conveys who we are and whose we are by God's act of grace.

But John's baptism isn't lost in the baptism of Jesus. It's preserved along with the other mysteries Jesus assigns to it. We

still come to be washed because there's some dirt we can't get rid of by ourselves. We can make amends, and we ought to, as much as possible for the harm we've caused. We can say we're sorry, and sincerely pledge to do better next time. But we still need that word of forgiveness from beyond us. We can't get out of guilt by our own effort. Not that we haven't tried. We've told ourselves we are no worse than others, but if we're honest, that just means all of us need help. Maybe we've done a few nice things for our neighbors, hoping we'll prove our own righteousness and feel better ourselves. Sometimes, we've blamed everyone but us for our sins: our parents, our former spouses, our boss, our employees. But nothing seems to work. We still know ourselves as unclean. And so, when we hear about John and the water and the forgiveness of sins....

Presbyterians typically don't rebaptize. We only baptize once. We believe that whatever God does in baptism takes the first time, whether the one baptized is an infant or an adult. Rebaptism, in our way of thinking, implies that either God wasn't able to keep the promises or chose not to, and that's not a very happy picture of God. So we are strong to say God is both able and willing to keep his word at the font, which includes the washing away of sins.

We may not need to be rebaptized, but we certainly need to stay in touch with our baptism. The more we talk about it, think

about it, refer to it, the more likely its benefits will soak into us.

For this reason, many Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches place their baptismal font at the entrance to the nave, so that every Sunday as worshippers enter, they may touch the water to their forehead, making the sign of the cross, and remember that God has forgiven them. For this reason, Martin Luther got up every morning, walked over to a bowl of water, and put his fingers in it, saying, "I am a child of God," so that his guilt and fear wouldn't get the best of him. For this reason, fellow believers write articles encouraging you and me to establish some water ritual in our daily routines to help us recall our baptism so we may live more steady and secure us. Whenever we wash our hands, whenever we do the dishes or whenever we take a shower, they suggest that we tell ourselves again and again and again that we have been washed and cleaned from our sins, with the hope that eventually we'll believe the word of truth.

Because God is faithful to his promises, we don't have to be rebaptized. But it takes a long time to appropriate this merciful truth, maybe a lifetime. So we only do ourselves a favor when we return to the water and rehearse God's grace. "I am forgiven. God loves me. I can let go of my guilt and shame because God has washed my sins away."

It's obvious that John was concerned that those who had received God's grace would keep it to themselves, that they would turn away the hungry even though they had more than enough food; that they wouldn't share their extra clothes with the cold; that they would use their power to line their own pockets while impoverishing others. John has a legitimate concern. Well-established religious people sometimes bask in God's love, but fail to love their neighbors, and presume that God is okay with this, though clearly, God is not. It's never out of season to preach on the ethical life that should flow out of our baptism.

But today I'm concerned just about us hearing grace. Well-established religious people can also lose touch with the very core of their faith. And the core for us is we are forgiven. You are forgiven, precisely of those sins you think can't be forgiven and to which you cling in guilt and dishonor. Why don't you let God wash them away? God's not going to hold them against you. Why keep holding them against yourself? Let it be bath time.

When I was in seminary, the students pitched in to buy a baptismal font for the chapel, which only had a small baptismal bowl at the time. We did this in honor of Dr. Hubert Morrow. It was a fitting gesture because nobody advocated for a robust theology of baptism more than Dr. Morrow. He believed God

acted in Jesus Christ to save sinners, and that baptism was one of the chief ways God got ahold of us with his grace.

Dr. Morrow didn't know that a font was being made to honor his work. He was completely surprised during the weekly chapel service when we dedicated the font to the glory of God and in honor of him. We included a renewal of baptism in the service where everyone was invited to come forward, touch the water and remember God's promise and claim. Dr. Morrow was one of the first in line.

Now, Dr. Morrow was an intellectual, always put together, conscious of what was appropriate in a given situation, a person of deep faith, but emotionally reserved. But when he got to the font, he broke down. He fell to one knee, wrapped his arms around the font and wept like a baby. They were tears of gratitude, as far as I could tell, no doubt sparked by the occasion, but also for what the water meant to him. Through the church, God had found him, a sinner, and washed him clean.

As I look back on that event, it occurs to me that the only thing that stands between relief of sin and me is me. Maybe so as not to fight over baptism with other Christians, I have downplayed its importance in the life of faith. Maybe in an effort not to reduce baptism to magic, I've been too skeptical of its power. Maybe pride keeps me from admitting my need for cleansing, and I refuse

to make myself open to God's gift of grace, protecting myself.

Probably in some measure all of the above apply to me. But I'm beginning to wonder how long I can keep this up, and for what purpose? I only have so much time left. Do I not want to live it free from guilt? Do I not want forgiveness to permeate every day of my life?

God has given the great gift of forgiveness, and baptism is the sign. Get in touch with yours. Swim in it. Rejoice in it. Don't figure out a hundred ways why it can't be true. Let God speak to you through your baptism, and with God's permission, let your sins be washed away.