

First, just to be clear, today we are baptizing, and I'm not in the mood to apologize about it.

This is not a service of infant dedication. Infant dedications are fine and legitimate. You'll find a few of them in the Bible. God asks Sampson's mother to dedicate him as a Nazirite and that's exactly what she does not long into his life. Once barren Hannah dedicates her boy Samuel to God's service as soon as he's done nursing. In dedications, we give back to God what God has given to us. We're the chief actors. We dedicate to God. We can also dedicate buildings and worship vessels. Again, there's nothing wrong with dedications of buildings or babies, but that isn't what we're doing today.

We are baptizing this baby. In baptism, *God* is the chief actor. We're heavily involved, of course. You can't have a baptism without a community into which someone is baptized. But we're not the main mover and shaker today. God is. In and through Neyland's family, in and through the church, and in ways we trust but don't understand, God is claiming Neyland as his own for the sake of Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. That's what our tradition says about baptism. Baptism is a sacrament, and the main actor in the sacraments is God.

We're not christening, either. I'm not mad at you if you have used that word regularly, but I would like to share some

history. Christening refers to that part of the service in which the baptized receive his or her Christian name. This was a big deal in that era of official state churches. The legal, binding name was given to every person at baptism. But we don't give official names in baptism now. Now we use the word christening only at infant baptisms, and most often as a fabric softener. It's a gentle way of saying baptism without saying it, so our words won't rub too roughly on the skin of those who might not understand. It's softer on us, too, because we may be uncertain about having babies at the font and might find it difficult to explain. We may even be a little embarrassed by what we're doing, given the dominance of believer's baptism in our area.

Well, not today. We're baptizing. Christen all the boats you want. We're baptizing, phooey on our uncertainty, self-doubt and confusion. Baptizing a person before she or he has any visible faith may sound strange to us, even if we have grown up in this church. Indeed, if we were baptizing just any baby that crawled down the street, it would be strange. But that's not what we're doing today. We're baptizing this baby, Neyland; this baby who belongs to this mother, Kristi, who is also baptized and believing and committed to the discipleship of her child; this baby whose larger family is a matrix of faith surrounding her; this baby who is going to grow up in this covenant community, surrounded by our

love and prayers and discipline. God is already working in Neyland's life, laying claim to her, before she has the capacity to respond. Neyland belongs to God. And just as circumcision was the sign of belonging to the covenant in the Old Testament, baptism is the sign of belonging in the New.

And guess what. We're not going to baptize Neyland again. We don't need to. Whatever God does in baptism, we can count on God to stick with it, to keep God's promises. When someone is baptized over and over, it implies that something didn't take the first time, that God either was unwilling or unable to accomplish whatever baptism accomplishes. Repeating baptisms minimizes God's activity, and implies the state of mind of the baptized matters the most. Some will argue that since they don't remember being baptized as infants they feel cheated and would like to experience it now so that they will have a memory of it. Others will note quite correctly that they didn't know exactly what they were doing the first time they were baptized, but since they know now, they would like to be baptized again. Most often, folks will argue that they have sinned a bunch since their baptism – they have a diary to prove it – and they would like to wash off the junk. Who wouldn't?

But let me offer some rebuttals in reverse order. The truth is, if we had to be rebaptized when our sins piled up, we would be

getting baptized every other day, and we might never get rid of all of them. What security is in that? Better to remember that we are washed already and to trust the forgiving promises of God. To those who think they didn't know what they were doing the first time they got baptized, amen to that. I bet not a single person in the history of baptism knew exactly what they were doing when they were baptized, infant or adult. When we got married, we didn't know what we were doing, either. Twenty years later, now we know. But that doesn't mean we weren't truly married or that we need to remarry. Finally, we can remember and celebrate our baptisms without a conscious memory of it. Nobody remembers being born, but we celebrate our birth every year, or at least until we're tired of our birthdays.

So we baptize once. We don't undercut the comfort and power baptism affords by implying it needs repeating. If you have been baptized more than once, I'm not out to get you. But from our tradition's perspective, it wasn't necessary. Your baptism took the first time, and your current faith grew out of it. Once is more than ample from a more than ample God of grace. You won't see us baptizing Neyland again.

You may be thinking, "The preacher is fired up and ready to fight today." You're right, I am. But I'm not looking to fight the Baptists, the Mennonites, the Christian Church, the Assemblies

of God or any other group that only baptizes persons at the time they profess faith in Christ. I'm fighting against whatever causes us to be squeamish about our own practice, the forces that fill us with doubt about what we're doing with this baby and whether we should be doing it. The truth is our practice teaches something very important. When babies are baptized, it's crystal clear that salvation is by grace. What has the baby done to earn God's favor or to prove herself worthy in God's eyes? Nothing. Yet, God loves and adores. God brands and claims the child through us, the covenant community. In infant baptism, who takes the initiative and who does the redeeming is obvious, and it's not us.

Believer's baptism – waiting until someone expresses his faith – also teaches something important, the necessity of trust in Christ, the response of faith. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, but the gift of God." For this very reason, we don't baptize all infants, but only those whose parent or parents believe in Jesus Christ and participate in the community of faith. Faith in Jesus Christ must be active in some form at the font, either in the community of those baptizing or in the person being baptized. Baptism doesn't make sense outside of the circle of Christian faith formed by God's grace.

No doubt many of us are wondering what the Bible says about infant baptism versus believer's baptism. That's a good

question. However, the Bible doesn't tell us directly at what point to baptize. The authors of the Bible had different fish to fry. Only centuries later, following the Protestant Reformation, did we get hung up on the mode of baptism and the proper age for it.

Most baptisms in the New Testament are adult baptisms: Paul, for instance; the thousands baptized at Pentecost; and the Ethiopian eunuch; all grown-ups who profess faith and are baptized. We should expect as much because the Bible refers mostly to that first generation of believers. They were all converts. Adults were naturally the first to switch allegiance to Jesus Christ. Infants and children wouldn't have the capacity to make that decision. But what about the children of converts, and the children of children of converts as the church began to extend through time? Should they receive baptism? Early on, the church decided yes. Eventually infant baptism became the most common practice and remains so today across the globe. Even as early as the Book of Acts, infant baptism is implied when Peter preaches that the promise of forgiveness is "...for you, your children and all who are far away." And we can't shrug off the baptism of Cornelius's household. Once the Roman soldier was baptized, so was everyone else in his house, most likely including his children.

None of this is to say a person's faith doesn't matter in the work of salvation. One day Neyland will need to stand on her own

two feet, and accept the heritage that has been given to her. But when that day comes, we'll see her faith as the outgrowth of her baptism, not the condition for it. We will celebrate God keeping God's baptismal promises to form faith in Jesus Christ through the church.

Maybe some of us are feeling like I'm making a big deal out of nothing. You may wonder why all the fuss. The day denominations fought publicly over baptism are over, and thank goodness. Can't we just focus on other issues? After all, baptism is just a symbol, right? What really matters is (you fill in the blank.)

I have no interest in reviving the days when denominations screamed at each other over baptism. From the beginning, our church has accepted the baptism of other churches, no matter when it was done or how. Immersion is an ancient practice and a fitting sign of dying and rising with Christ, a prominent theme connected to baptism in the Bible. So is our tradition of pouring and sprinkling, reflecting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, another theme in the Bible connected to baptism. We're not going to fight over this. Baptism is baptism, and that's true whether you're 9 months old or 90 years old, dunked or dampened.

But I think it's a mistake to resolve the tension around baptism by saying it's only a symbol. Only a symbol? Is that what

we say when we see someone burning a flag? It doesn't mean anything, it's just a symbol. Or are we stirred with anger? When someone loses a wedding ring, do they brush it off, or do they look all over for it precisely because of what it symbolizes? You wouldn't dare say to someone trying to get rid of all the crosses in our churches, "It's alright; it's just a symbol." Symbols convey the very thing they stand for. They locate realities that are otherwise difficult to pin down. So we lose something if we minimize baptism, if we act as if it's not that important. We should say, "O my goodness, baptism is a symbol, and how blessed we are to have it." It's a concrete expression of God's love for us before we can love back, God's forgiveness poured upon us before we know how to ask for it, God's acceptance before we can do anything to earn it. We only rob ourselves if we reduce baptism's importance in order to make it less controversial.

Jesus doesn't seem to hesitate at all when he meets post-resurrection with his followers on the mountain. "Go make disciples," he charges, "Baptize and teach." He gave them their baptismal backbone. And that's what I hope we find today, our nerve. May we stand firm, and do what we do without apology. This is not a dedication. It's not a christening, either. We baptize Neyland, and join God in claiming her as our own.