

What does a pastor talk about in a season chalked full of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, a presidential campaign in an election year, hurricanes, fires, summer break from school just on the cuff of starting a new school year, congregational development discernment, religious tension, the emergency response early this morning off Boonsboro Road between Peakland Methodist and Mimosa, and more self-help books being published than butts sitting in the pews of churches? For us here at FPCLY, I will tell you that it is none of the above. Not because they aren't important, fun to talk about, or wouldn't make for good sermon material, but because there is something else, more fundamental if you will, for us to focus our hearts and minds on.

What, you might ask? Impact, you might assume. Yes, it is our annual week of Impact this week, in which we set out to pursue change and be changed. In many ways today we will be addressing our root belief in what drives us to this work and mission as a church, however, the opportunities of Impact this week are not our main focus. What we are going to focus on today, and for the next several weeks actually, is “Renewing our Covenant”. Renewing our Covenant with God, with one another, with our understanding and belief of God's calling for us to be the church in this time and in this place. Why today, this season, are we going to do this? First, because it never hurts to do a little inventory on where we are and how we are doing with our relationship with God, and second, because the world in which we live is waning in Christian influence and participation in the church is declining. We have the opportunity and responsibility to engage with God and God's kingdom here on earth, accomplishing divine work through divine appointments, and therefore, we are going to renew our covenant with the hopes of relighting the spark that first drew us in to God's embrace and our longing to be a part of God's mission and ministry through the church. Sound like a plan? Are you ready? Good!

Each week we will be unpacking what it means to renew our covenant, beginning with remembering our baptism and then moving to 3 weeks of unpacking the acronym I.M.P.A.C.T.. We will conclude with a celebration inviting us to make a renewal of our covenant with God, with one another, and with our understanding and belief of God's calling for us to be the church in this time and this place. We will do this through a Reaffirmation of our Baptism, Renewal of our Covenant, on August 25. So, I pray you will not only take in what today offers us as a start, but plan to join in each of the next few weeks as we are invited by God to renew our covenant.

Our text to guide us will be **2 Corinthians 9**.

Paul's language in this chapter has a contextual change from the rest of the letter. This chapter and chapter 8. With his trademark relaxed assurance, Paul offers what has become called “A Philosophy of Christian Giving.” He speaks of general principles such as consecration, readiness, proportionality, and definite purpose. He highlights methods such as having someone to push (inspire), honesty (transparency), psychological smartness coupled with the Holy Spirit, and persistence. And he includes motives such as giving is a test of love, giving is modeled after the self-giving of Christ, and giving produces profound spiritual results. Many of these will be revisited in the coming weeks.

Today, a great place for us to start this conversation and journey together is at the font, remembering your baptism. Why? Because your baptism is the birthplace of your promise (or covenant) with God. Your baptism is where you were adopted by God, affirmed by the church, and declare your allegiance to God and God's ways through life. You could say your baptism was the catalyst of choice in which your covenant with God was forged. Yes, even as an infant 😊

Do you remember your baptism? Confirmation? If yes, I pray today is an assurance of the power your baptism has on your life. If no, I pray today sparks a desire to reconnect with the power of your baptism as to not remember could pose several difficulties.

Recently the members of a high school youth fellowship group in a local congregation were asked, "What does your baptism mean to you?" Without exception all of them answered, "Nothing." When their reasons for this response were sought, they replied that it was because none of them could remember his or her baptism. On further reflection they confessed that they were not sure that they understood what baptism was all about and that the church had never made this very clear to them.

In a Presbyterian congregation in a small town, Mrs. Jones, an elder for nearly twenty years, approaches her pastor to ask whether or not next Sunday would be a good time to baptize her grandson who will be visiting for the weekend. Her daughter and son-in-law live a city several hundred miles away and have not attended church since they were married. Mrs. Jones is eager to have the baptism take place at a time when as many family members as possible can be present. She will be deeply hurt if the pastor does not agree to "do the ceremony."

A fourteen-year-old girl is asked by her parents to enroll in the confirmation class offered at her church. She is told by her parents that the class will prepare her "to join the church." She answers with some surprise, "I thought that I joined the church when I was baptized." Her parents do not know how to respond.

"Is one expected to demonstrate a different manner of living because of baptism?" asked a sixteen-year-old black male. "Is racism accepted behavior? Maybe baptism doesn't make the difference... it's just another empty ritual." His cabin director at the presbytery camp, opened for the first to racial and ethnic minorities, sat and stared at him.

A woman who was brought up in the Presbyterian Church marries a man who is a member of an independent Baptist church. When she seeks to join her husband's church, she is told by the pastor that she must be baptized again, since infant baptism is not a "baptism of repentance."

Head spinning yet? These five vignettes illustrate something of the extraordinary confusion about baptism in the church today. This confusion is so deep and so extensive that it has taken on the proportion of a crisis. Baptism is not, as some might suppose, simply a question of what rites and practices are appropriate. Rather, baptism has to do with the very roots of what the church believes and confesses about God's grace, the nature of faith, and the meaning of Christian community. In short, it has to do with the most fundamental elements of Christian faith and life.

**Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism" - The office of Worship for the PC (USA), 1985*

For many, baptism is considered a happy moment. We are amused and intrigued by the various responses of babies. As cute as it is (and it is even when they cry), sometimes that means overlooking the profound initiation, cleansing from sin, entering into the death and resurrection of Christ, and of being received into a new community or family of faith. What

is happening in baptism is a life-changing and transforming event, one with fundamental repercussions for the rest of your life. It is more than poetic liturgy and sprinkled water soon to be forgotten as life returns to normal.

The sacrament of baptism requires everyone- parents or guardians, the session, and the whole congregation- to see that baptism is administered only to those who will be responsibly nurtured through participation in the worship and work of the church. To do less than this is to empty the sacrament of its meaning and to hide the graciousness of God from those who seek it. Since the days of John Calvin (Reformed theologian best known for his TULIP theology and one of the fathers of Presbyterianism), he helped encourage the view that those baptized, even infants and children of believers, are heirs to the covenant of grace. For the Reformed tradition, of which we are apart, whether we are five or fifty, we are all infants in the faith when we are baptized, and it is into the one holy catholic (universal) church, Christ's church, that we enter by baptism. Here it is: The sacrament of baptism is the beginning of a process for which God, you as the baptized, and the whole congregation takes responsibility.

"Today, we live in a secular society in which Christianity is waning in influence and adherents. Those 'outside' the church cannot always identify characteristics of Christian living among the baptized that distinguish the baptized from the nonbaptized. It is entirely possible that the crisis of the church is really not qualitatively different from the baptismal crisis. The crisis of faith in which belief seems impossible, untenable, or irrelevant may be due in part to the fact that the baptismal realities of belonging to God, being transformed, dying, rising, being joined inextricably to a body of people whose lives are significantly different are sadly "invisible realities." Yet they are the ones which baptism and confirmation proclaim and of which they are themselves signs."

*Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism"- The office of Worship for the PC (USA), [1985](#)

The last phrase was recognized and commented on in 1985. What have we, as the church, been doing in the last 40 years? And before we all begin to name several reasons for this or that, the root cause of the church's inadequacy and inefficiency is that sin pervades our lives. We mess up. We are broken. We do things that aren't right. Say things that aren't right. We don't do things. We don't say things. Guess what? Because our sin persists, we need to experience many times the power and grace of our baptism, because baptism is the place sin goes to die. To do this doesn't mean we need to be baptized over and over, for the promises of God are clung to by faith. However, because sin persists, it is necessary to renew our faith, renew our covenant, experience the ongoing meaning of baptism in our lives. In faith we can have a living, life-transforming confidence in God, that God's grace will become more real and more powerful for us as we renew.

The more of God's grace to permeate our inner core, the more of God's grace will take root and produce fruit in the church and the world. There is no more powerful fuel for life than God's grace.

In quick summary: Baptism calls us to lead a life of commitment to God's will, a life of Christian discipleship. Regardless of when we are baptized, our life as Christians after baptism will never be as totally committed as it should be. We never live up fully to the claim upon us that is part of baptism. Consequently, repentance is an ongoing part of Christian discipleship and renewal and recommitment are realities that we experience as Christians.

Baptism has significance throughout our lives, therefore it is in order to acknowledge and to celebrate the grace of God bestowed on us in baptism and to lay claim to that grace. This is what Martin Luther (theologian) did through his oft-repeated phrase, "I am baptized." Whenever Luther's faith was weakening, or the challenge of evil before him was threatening, he would remember his baptism and find new strength and courage. In renewing his covenant with God, Luther experienced again and again its power and meaning.

Baptism is to be the referent point for our daily lives, with all that it means renewed through daily repentance and faithfulness in discipleship.

I mentioned in the beginning that IMPACT has a place in this conversation, and it does. We will dig further into this the next few weeks. But I did want to share a quote from Gary Williams about Impact and the opportunities it represents because it bridges together all we have talked about with baptism and the work of Impact: Pursuing Change, Being Changed. He says, *"Pursuing Change...Being Changed means once we are 'in Christ' everything changes - our perspective, our priorities, our values, our actions, our relationships, our heart. Growing in Christ requires change. God is making all things new, even me."*

In the power of the Holy Spirit and the spirit of Impact Week coming up, I pray we can all experience the newness of Christ's love, grace, and mercy each and every day, for we are all children of the covenant, holy, and beloved.