

# **"Baptism and Beautiful Feet"** **by Kevin Ogle**

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Pentecost 13

Main Lection Text: Romans 10:5-15/10/08

Gracious God, apart from you our mouths are dumb and we have nothing to say. So send us we pray your Holy Spirit, that in hearing your word we might know what we ought to know, and see what we can do, to truly become your faithful people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

As I was beginning to think about what I would say to you today, Deborah informed me of Seekers theme for this liturgical season. "Chosen to Live, Choosing to Serve."

"That should work well for a baptismal sermon," I replied. "Do you know what the lection texts are?" She wasn't sure but quickly e-mailed them. When I looked them up a short time later, I was less pleased than I had been with the liturgical theme. First, in Genesis 37, we have Joseph's older brothers selling him off into slavery – yikes! Psalm 105 seemed more fitting in its invitation: singing praises to God, remembering God's faithfulness, seeking the Divine Presence...but soon veers off into Joseph's story. So onto

Mathew 14:22ff, and I confess I've never really known what to do with Jesus startling the Disciples by walking to them on water; then we get Peter attempting the same feat but beginning to sink so that Jesus has to pull him up. Sure, we have plenty of water in that story – which suits my Disciples believer's baptism tradition – but personally I've never seen walking on water as an especially helpful image for baptism or Christian life.

On to Paul, in his letter to Romans, Chapter 10. At this point I'm thinking I may have to largely punt on the lectionary for today. But drilling a little into the 10 verses assigned for today, I soon began to see that we have good old Paul, once again trying to articulate the core of the Gospel as he understands it, to a splintered Roman Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Let's go with that!

Paul wants the early Roman house and tenement churches to come together and support a mission of bringing the Gospel to Spain. But the early Roman Gentile and Jewish Christians have fallen prey to divisive competition for status based on religious heritage and other cultural distinctions. Paul is trying to focus on the core faith that unites them in a new and common identity. So Paul in Romans appealed to two basic sacramental practices that help shape and enact that grace-based identity: baptism and the common Eucharistic table fellowship. In Chapter 6 he invokes baptism because it is the way that persons are ritually welcomed into the community of Christ's followers, and it signifies their dying to sin and rising with Christ. Later in Romans Paul calls for inclusiveness and a loving, considerate spirit in the Eucharistic table fellowship, a fellowship that appears to have been a shared feast as an extension of worship – a feast that was also used for evangelism.<sup>2</sup>

For Paul, religious law and human distinctions are no longer to be the means by which persons find right relationship with

God. Rather, a living faith relationship with God is made possible through acceptance of Jesus as Lord, as we have it in today's scripture (10:13) "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." In other words, right or reconciled relationship with God is universally available as a gift of grace that cannot be earned or justly withheld by humans.

But here Paul gets to the heart of Christian community and evangelism. How are we to receive that grace? As Paul puts it (v.14-17): "How are they to call on one whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Christ unless [some] are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'...So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."

Which, I now see, brings us to the reason that Nate is here today, along with his family of origin, as we counselor types say. Faith is not formed in a vacuum, and the word of Christ is an embodied word. Grace comes to us through relationships. And the church relationships that have embodied God's grace and love for both Nate and Jeremiah in a consistent and formative way have primarily been relationships made possible in the context of Seekers Church, at least until their most recent years.

So I was not surprised last spring after Nate's exploratory pastor's class with Lee Hull-Moses at First Christian Falls Church, where I am currently a member and where Ron Hutchison was Nate's sponsor, to learn that Nate would prefer to be baptized with Seekers, though he was not ready to be baptized just yet. And I was a bit surprised but happy for Nate to learn that Falls Church Presbyterian Church, where Carol Ann and the boys now attend, would confirm him with his confirmation class on Holy Saturday this year, even though he

planned to defer his actual baptism. And as we worked to clarify the when and where of a "Seekers baptism" for Nate this spring and summer, I have found myself grateful that the context for this event has become a regular Seekers Sunday service.

Paul's borrowed image of beautiful feet in today's epistle somehow called to mind for me the old Christian tradition that Seekers has observed of foot washing in Maundy Thursday services. There have been many Seekers and many metaphorical "beautiful feet" who have been the bearers of God's grace in the lives of our family. Old timers will remember Nathaniel's birth story, where my anxious call to then mid-wife-in-training Shauna Leinbach in the we hours of Thanksgiving morning from GW Hospital where Carol Ann was in labor brought immediate textbook instructions for our attending nurse on how to help Carol Ann reposition him so that he could be successfully delivered without emergency surgery.

And then there was Nathaniel's (and later Jeremiah's) first pre-baptismal communion. For Nate, that happened in Nov. of 1995, when he would have been just about 2. Having grown up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), with weekly communion and believer's baptism, the congregations of my childhood did not allow children to partake of communion before baptism. From that experience, I expected children to be denied communion. However, being retrieved from nursery duty on that communion Sunday in Nov. of 1995 at 2025 Mass. Ave., Nathaniel asked to stay with me, and as I brought him with me to the circle, it suddenly became clear that I would not deny him the elements that he had begun to immediately find fascinating. As I recall, at that point Carol Ann decided to provide him with some quick and concisely worded catechesis, something to the effect that this is communion, we do it to remember Jesus. He then clearly and slowly repeated the word communion, and then had his first.

That day no one from Seekers took me to task or challenged me for serving communion to an un-baptized toddler. We were welcomed as children of God to the inclusive Table of our Lord in the presence of a grace-full Christian faith community, which remained our family's church home for about the next 10 years, a comfortable fit for parents who came from different streams within the Christian tradition, one Protestant, one Catholic.

In August of 1997, a few weeks before Jeremiah's birth and as Nathaniel neared the age of four, we claimed time in a Seekers service to share the meaning of Nathaniel's name with the congregation and to announce that we had chosen a special name for the son on the way. As part of that ritual, Philip Amoss shared a reassuring message with Nathaniel about the joys and occasional frustrations of becoming a big brother.

And so our boys grew up as Seekers, benefiting from many adult relationships and some with peers and older youth as a result, a real gift of grace to a couple and new family, where the nearest grandparents were over 4 hours away. On January 1, 2001, Seekers hosted a special memorial service in observance of the 10th anniversary of my father's death, the first memorial service my immediate family had been able to have for my father. It was a moment of spiritual healing and reconciliation for the family in which I was reared, and a new point of connection for Nate and Jeremiah with a grandfather they never met.

And of course I could go on. But we are here today as a result of Nate's claiming of Seekers as his spiritual home, and to witness his baptism into the universal church. As a product of Seekers, Nate already shows signs of honoring his own inner sense of call as he is beginning his outward journey into 9th grade and beyond. He retrieves plastic bottles to recycle at home after summer league basketball games. He has resisted recruitment to play interscholastic football this year, clear that he wants to stay focused on basketball and

school in the fall. He is making important choices in his life.

With that awareness, I want to say a bit more about baptism, especially in the context of a church that encourages infant or believer's baptism, deferring to the preferences of its diverse members. Today, many of us are looking back on a baptism we remember or one that happened for us as infants, and I expect at least some of us are looking forward to a baptism to come or that we might be considering.

Regardless of one's current relationship to the sacrament of baptism, it began as a rite that was a way Gentiles could become Jews, signifying a new life and covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. But according to the gospels, Jesus' cousin John the Baptist urged it as a ritual of repentance for both Jews and Gentiles. Many responded, including Jesus, to be baptized by John in the Jordan river.

John's call to repentance was accompanied by a scathing attack on the unjust status quo, leading Herod to first imprison John and later to execute him (Mt. 14). The world does not easily receive those who truthfully and fearlessly challenge the morality of those in the seats of power. Those who challenge the status quo with a call to repentance and purification are often at best ignored, and at worst attacked with all the resources available to those challenged. It was into such a world that both John and Jesus were called.

Following his baptism, filled with the Holy Spirit, the gospels portray Jesus as tempted to power as domination and to betray his identity as God's chosen child by his own choices. Jesus is tempted, in other words, as any of us may be, to misuse his gifts primarily in the pursuit of self-centered desire, rather than to use his gifts in God's calling for his life. After a time in the wilderness, he chooses to serve God, with all the challenge, healing and struggle that brings.

And after the powers of domination that rule this fallen, broken world had tried with all the resources at their disposal to put an end to Jesus, the power of God's Spirit overcomes Christ's death by execution on a cross through resurrection, and the movement that became the early church was born and sustained. Always in that early church, baptism was the way that believers were incorporated into the church, the outward sign of the spiritual reality of the Holy Spirit's guiding presence at the center of each believer's life. In Paul's metaphor, the church has become the new body of Christ at work in the world. Baptism has remained the ritual through which new members have officially been incorporated into Christ's body, the church.

All that said, I would like to state as clearly as I can what I understand God to do in baptism. For now, I understand baptism as an expression of God's self-giving through which God makes personal the salvation accomplished through Christ for each one of us.

James White identifies five dominant New Testament images which capture the wonderful action of God on our behalf that takes place in baptism. First, baptism unites us with Christ and his work, baptizing us into both his death and resurrection. Second, baptism incorporates us into the church. Third, God bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is promised through repentance and baptism. Fourth, in baptism God forgives our sin and reconciles us – an understanding we can return to each time we celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist. Fifth, in baptism God provides us with new birth and entry into new life as part of "the royal priesthood of the Spirit-filled community."<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean in practice, in the world? Perhaps it might look like the "Revolution" described in an e-mail excerpt I received last week that is apparently from a book called "The Big Glow", by Brian Piergrossi:

*On the surface of the world right now there is war and violence and things seem dark. But calmly and quietly, at the same time, something else is happening underground. An inner revolution is taking place and certain individuals are being called to a higher light. It is a silent revolution. From the inside out. From the ground up.*

*It is time for me to reveal myself. I am an embedded agent of a secret, undercover Clandestine Global Operation, a spiritual conspiracy. We have sleeper cells in every nation on the planet.*

*You won't see us on the T.V.  
You won't read about us in the newspaper.  
You won't hear about us on the radio.*

*We don't seek any glory.  
We don't wear any uniform.  
We come in all shapes and sizes, colors and styles.*

*Most of us work anonymously. We are quietly working behind the scenes in every country and culture of the world. Cities big and small, mountains and valleys, in farms and villages, tribes and remote islands.*

*You could pass by one of us on the street and not even notice. We go undercover. We remain behind the scenes. It is of no concern to us who takes the final credit. But simply that the work gets done.*

*Occasionally we spot each other in the street. We give a quiet nod and continue on our way so no one will notice.*

*During the day many of us pretend we have normal jobs. But behind the false storefront at night is where the real work takes place.*

*Some call us the 'Conscious Army.' We are slowly creating a new world with the power of our minds and hearts. We follow, with passion and joy, our orders from the Central Command, the Spiritual Intelligence Agency.*

*We are dropping soft, secret love bombs when no one is looking*

*Poems*

*Hugs*

*Music*

*Photography*

*Movies*

*Kind words*

*Smiles*

*Meditation and prayer*

*Dance*

*Social activism*

*Websites*

*Blogs*

*Random acts of kindness*

*We each express ourselves in our own unique ways with our own unique gifts and talents. 'Be the change you want to see in the world.' That is the motto that fills our hearts. We know it is the only way real transformation takes place. We know that quietly and humbly we have the power of all the oceans combined.*

*Our work is slow and meticulous, like the formation of mountains. It is not even visible at first glance. And yet with it entire tectonic plates shall be moved in the*

*centuries to come. Love is the new religion of the 21st century. You don't have to be a highly educated person. Or have any exceptional knowledge to understand it. It comes from the intelligence of the heart, Embedded in the timeless evolutionary pulse of all human beings. Be the change you want to see in the world. Nobody else can do it for you. We are now recruiting.*

*Perhaps you will join us, Or already have...*

*All are welcome...*

*The door is open.*

Nate's baptism invites each of us to reflect on the meaning of our own past or future baptism. Because throughout our lives, empowered by God's Holy Spirit, we struggle to grow into our baptism. Past, present, or future, our baptism tells us who we are, and whose we are. It calls us to be God's sacrament, visible signs of God's presence and activity in human history, so that when others look at how we live our lives, they will see a living sign of God's love for the world, the broken world Christ came to save.<sup>4</sup> Amen.

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1. My understanding of Paul's message in Romans is greatly informed by retired biblical scholar Robert Jewett, whose perspective I shared in brief in a sermon at Seekers in March of 1996, "Suppression of the Truth, Right-wising and the Eucharist." For more on this perspective see Jewett's

commentary on Romans or most engagingly *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

2. Jewett lecture, 1996.

3. James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 35-41.

4. John Westerhoff, *Building God's People in a Materialistic Society* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 37.