

January 24, 2021

I John 4:7-8,12-16

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in God and God in us, because we have been given God's Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that God, our Parent, has sent the Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Amicable Church has, traditionally, recognized the rite of baptism as a sacrament. Coming from the root word for sacred, a sacrament is a belief that God is present in a religious rite in a special way. In baptism God is present in the water, which cleanses us, bodily and spiritually.

In some Christian traditions there is a belief that only those baptized will be welcomed in heaven. All others will be condemned to hell. Fearful that a newborn would go to hell, the church, very early on, began to baptize infants. Infant baptism might have its roots in the Jewish naming ceremony; a ceremony that in Jesus' day was held in the synagogue 8 days after the birth of a baby boy.

Now, I do not put much stock in church doctrine, especially when a doctrine is used to control or coerce people. While I choose to accept a doctrine of sacraments – God is present in water and in the bread and cup, for example, my acceptance is one of convenience. Most people have heard about the rite of baptism. It becomes more cumbersome and time consuming to

try to lay out my belief system, as I am doing here today, in order to say what we are attempting to do in and through baptism.

When it comes to sacraments and God's presence in a particular rite, I find myself in agreement with the Baptists. They do not have sacraments in their tradition. They have ordinances; things Jesus "ordered" them to do. There are two. "Go and baptize," Jesus said. And, when breaking bread and sharing drink with one another, "remember me." Baptists believe that either everything in life is sacred, is imbued with God's presence, or nothing is.

If baptism is not a sacrament, why do we practice this rite? Of what value is it? The short answer is found in the ceremony itself: the sacrament of baptism is the sign and seal

- of the covenant of grace,
- of union with Christ in the church, which is Christ's body,
- of cleansing of heart and soul,
- and of our welcome into the household of faith.

The first three things on this list are personal. They are dependent on Christina and Orianna to recognize and accept for themselves God's grace in their lives, their being united with Christ's body, the church, and knowing mistakes – past, present, and future – are not a permanent stain on who they are.

I believe grace, unity or oneness, and cleansing or being without stain in God's eyes is true of every person, baptized or not. Baptism does not change God's relationship with, God's love for a person. But, it might change one's relationship with God.

The fourth sign and seal of baptism is why I continue to practice this rite: welcome into the household of faith. In my years at Amicable Church I have baptized several children. At the tender age of 7 they already know about "welcome into the household of faith". They already know what being on the outside means. They want to be baptized because they want to belong. Baptism is the welcome into a faith family, the "belonging".

Christina and Orianna's welcome into our household of faith is dependent on us, at first. Now baptized, they are part of this body

of Christ, part of our household of faith. This baptismal welcome becomes a two-way street.

Let me explain:

Amicable Church, as part of the body of Christ, is charged with being welcoming of any and all of God's children and encouraging them to grow in their relationship with God, who has been revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. With humble pride I lift up the members and friends of Amicable Church, who work hard to share with the world God's welcome.

The outward and visible sign of this welcome for the last few years has been our rainbow doors. With great regularity people, strangers, have stopped in my office just to say thank you for displaying the doors. For them the doors are a sign of God's welcome and love.

I am telling no secrets, when I say, Christina came to worship and found a faith family home here at Amicable Church, because one day she drove by the church, saw the doors, couldn't believe her eyes that a church would offer that kind of welcome, came to worship, found the church really was that welcoming, and has been committed to the ministries of Amicable Church ever since.

And, if I may be so bold, speaking for Orianna, she found teachers and students in Sunday School who welcomed her and shared the love of God with her.

That is one side of the welcome coin, so to speak. In baptism the baptized promises to share the welcome received with the world. This can be a joyous and difficult task; a task that requires support. One of the supports I give here at Amicable for the continued faith growth of those baptized is a baptismal blessing verse.

Christina's blessing verse is from I John 4:7: Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

My theological word list to talk about God is shrinking. I can go on for paragraphs, when talking about God, what I really want to communicate about God is summed up with words like: Love. Life. Oneness. Christina's blessing verse is focused on Love. If she remembers only three words of this verse, I pray it is, "love one another." This is the core commandment, in my estimation, if one is to live the baptism welcome out in one's life. I have watched Christina become involved at Amicable. I know too of how she tries to serve the community she lives in. I am confident she is living her blessing verse out every day.

Orianna's blessing verse is: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. The three words I want Orianna to hold in memory are: "God is love." I have seen Orianna interact with her mother, with her family, with people here at Amicable Church. You can just see the love flow from her. There is no doubt in my mind that Orianna, in and through her love, abides in God and God in her. I am confident that Orianna, like her mother, will live into the welcome Amicable Church, in the name of Jesus the Christ, has offered her by welcoming others with grace and sharing with them the love that is God.

There is much about faith and life and love that I do not know. What I am certain of is that we meet God in and through welcoming love. John wrote in today's scripture reading: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

Christina and Orianna have come to be a part of our faith family in and through our sharing of God's welcoming love with them. And, by God's grace, they have allowed this love shared to flow through them and continue to radiate out and welcome others in.

May God, who is love, continue to give each one of us the courage and faith we will need to share this welcoming love each and every day. Amen.