

“Our Stewardship of God’s Precious Gifts”

1 John 4:7-21

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Some of you have wondered, “What do I pour water into the baptismal font, even when nobody is being baptized.

Good question. Hold onto that question.

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Today’s passage from John’s first letter, underscores one of the central messages of the Bible. God loves us, and God loved us long before we could ever love God. John is making it clear that if anybody thinks they can earn God’s love, or otherwise deserves God’s love, they are mistaken. God’s love precedes our efforts, our works, our energies.

God loved us before we ever loved anybody. If love is a test (and it’s not), no matter whether we pass or fail, God loved us, God loves us, God will love us.

(Does God always love the things we do? Of course not. But God always loves us. Preschool kids and the trick question.)

God always has and always will love us. Period.

For me, the truth of this love is best summarized not by words but by the pouring of water, the breaking of bread, and sharing the cup.

In the church, we call baptism and communion “sacraments” and, while we define sacraments variously, we agree that *sacraments* are visible signs of God’s invisible grace. There are two in the Presbyterian church—baptism and communion. (Lutherans add confession; Roman Catholics and Orthodox add four more: Holy Orders, marriage, the anointing of the sick, and confirmation.) Sacraments: *Visible signs of God’s invisible grace.* (Augustine: *Outward signs of inward grace.*)

For some time now I’ve been pouring water after the prayer of confession during the assurance of pardon. Churches often pour water at this moment to remind us precisely of God’s sustaining love for us. The waters of Baptism remind us that God washes away our sins. The waters of Baptism remind us that God provides for us. The waters of baptism remind us who we are (we are children of a loving God) and whose we are (we belong to God, and, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we belong to each other). The waters of baptism remind us that God wants us to live and love in community. *Blest be the tie that binds.*

For me, there’s hardly a more powerful sign of God’s love than water being poured into a baptismal font.

Baptism reminds us of promises. *Baptize the nations*, Jesus tells his disciples in the Great Commission found in Matthew’s Gospel. “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*” And then this promise: “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

Baptism reminds us of God's promise in Jesus Christ.

And baptism reminds us of our promises. At baptism we promise to raise our children to be like Jesus. And we promise to love the world in Jesus' name, to make disciples, to obey what Jesus taught, to walk like Jesus walked, to love like Jesus loved.

So baptism reminds us of the promise of God's love, and our promise to love other's in the manner of Jesus. This is how John puts it in verse 19: *We love God because God first loved us.*

Baptism reminds us that God's love is perfect, but our love is always a work in progress. *We love God because God first loved us*, John says, and he adds: *Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.* The yardstick for loving God is: how well do we love our neighbor? When we fail to love our neighbor, we fail to love God. That hurts us, and it hurts God.

John is both comforting us and putting us on edge: God's love is perfect; our love is not. But the comfort helps us with the challenge: because God loves us in Jesus Christ we are able to love others—and such efforts to love will be blessed however imperfectly we do it.

So, back to the waters of baptism. The water is messy. These waters contain comfort and challenge. The waters of baptism remind us that God loves us, provides for us, cleanses us, cares for us. The waters of baptism remind us that because God loves us we are called to love God by loving others. In these waters I find the comfort of God's love, and the challenge of my trying to love others.

When the great reformer Martin Luther was discouraged or afraid he would comfort himself by saying, *I am baptized! I am baptized!*

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I need to be reminded again, and again, and again of God's love. So, each week, for your sake and for mine, we'll be pouring waters into this font to remind us of our promise to love others in Christ's name, and of God's covenant-promise to love us.

God's love does not fail, and is poured from the Living Spring that will never dry up. God's love is the first word. God's love is the last.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

Amen and Amen.