

Good morning, St. James. I'm Bishop Susan Brown Snook. And it's a great pleasure to be with you this morning. Today in the service, we are going to be confirming a large group of people, which is something that I love to do. And as part of that, all of us will be reaffirming our own baptismal vows, which is a major celebration of God's grace. Confirmation is an adult affirmation of the vows that often others make for us at our baptism. And it is the confirmand's chance to make an adult commitment to their Christian faith.

Beyond that, the renewal of baptismal vows is something that I do on every visitation. And it's something that we do on other major feasts throughout the year because baptism is at the heart of our spiritual lives as followers of Jesus. But why is baptism so important? Why is a simple touch of water with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," such a major step in our spiritual life?

In fact, what does it mean to be baptized? Or to put it differently, since baptism is what makes us Christians, what difference does it make that we are Christians? One of the all-time great baptism scenes in movies is in the movie, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* The three escaped convicts, led by George Clooney, are walking through the woods when suddenly ghostly figures all dressed in white, begin to appear, and they're singing a classic gospel song and walking down to the river. And the convict Delmer says, "Appears to be some kind of a congregation." And they watch as one, after another of the white robed figures walks into the river and gets dunked by the pastor. Delmer gets inspired. He goes running down into the water, flounders his way to the front of the line. And in his dirty brown clothes, he gets dunked too. And as he comes up out of the water, he says, "Well, that's it boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out and heaven everlasting is my reward."

And George Clooney says, "Delmer, what are you talking about? We got bigger fish to fry." And Delmer says, "The preacher said all my sins done been washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo." And George Clooney says, "I thought you said you was innocent of them charges." And Delmer says, "Well, I was lying. And the preacher said that sins been washed away too. Neither God, nor man's got nothing on me now. Come on in, boys. The water is fine." Well, you can imagine the overwhelming sense of relief that an escaped convict might feel to know that his sins done been washed away and neither God nor man's got nothing on him now. Although it turns out in the movie, there are a lot of people who still think they have something on Delmer and

his friends, and they will spend a lot more time wandering in the wilderness before they're saved.

But baptism for us, like for Delmer, is the forgiveness of sins. But it's much more than that too. At Jesus's baptism, the gospels tell us that the heavens opened up and Jesus heard a voice saying, "You are my son, the beloved. In you, I am well pleased." For us, as for Jesus, baptism establishes us as God's beloved children. It confers on us an identity that can never be erased. And yet baptism is not the end of the story for Jesus, because Jesus goes on from there to be tempted in the wilderness, and then to begin his ministry in Galilee. That ministry will lead him to heal, to teach, to exercise compassion on the crowds, and eventually it will lead him to give his life on the cross, an act of self-sacrificial love. Courageous love. The deep abiding love of God for the world.

Well, love is what we see at work in our scriptures today. Extravagant love. You can read the lesson from the book of Acts and say, what is all this about circumcision? And what's with this dream about eating strange and unappetizing animals? Well, the answer is that circumcision and eating only kosher food are signs of the covenant that God has with the Jewish people. a covenant that continues to the present day. But God is telling Peter that in following Jesus, he is to take on a new covenant, a new identity where followers of Jesus are defined not by circumcision or by dietary laws, but by their relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which are gifts given in baptism. As we receive not only the water, the washing away of sins, but also the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers us for ministry and mission in the world.

Peter's dream tells us that while the Jewish people still maintain their own identity, that has brought so many gifts to the world, including the gift of Jesus, Christians will adopt a new identity. Refocusing our lives on God's mission to those who are not already part of God's covenant and expanding that covenant to all the people of the world. That change of identity and mission is the reason that Christ's love spread beyond Israel to us. This story marks the turning point in the book of Acts and a turning point in church history. Because from here on out, at its best, the church focuses its attention outwards. As the 20th century Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said, "The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of those who are not already members."

And although living for the sake of others instead of for ourselves does not always make us comfortable, it does not always take us to the same places in the future as it did in the past, it does not always allow us to keep the

same identity, the same way of worshiping, the same ways of living that were perfectly good before, still that love that calls us outwards is at the foundation of our calling as Christians, love that puts the welfare of others before our own, love that as Jesus commands us in the gospel, gives our love to others just as he gave his love to us.

God's love for us after all, is extravagant. It's overflowing, like Jesus in this gospel today on the night before he died, knowing that that love will take him to the cross. Christian theology says that God's love overflowed into creation and caused all things to come into existence. And God's love overflowed into Jesus who came into the world as the son of God, whose love was poured out for us, who was broken on the cross, so that his love could spill out, a love that was stronger than death, a love that would not stay locked in a tomb, a love that overflows to everlasting life. This story tells us that the very love that Jesus gave us is the same extravagant love that we are called to share with each other and with the world around us.

But how do we come to understand God's call to extravagant love and where it will send us? Some of us come to know God in miraculous, overwhelming spiritual experiences. But I think for most of us, coming to know God's love and love God and others in return is a journey. It's composed of multiple small moments like a flower coming to bloom over time. I was brought up in the church and I didn't really have a moment when God wasn't important to me, although I left the church for a number of years as a young adult. But moments in my life have opened me up to realize the overwhelming love of God.

I remember a time as a young adult, when it felt like my whole world was falling apart. And as a last resort, I went to church, not expecting much, but hoping. I went up to the altar rail for communion and the priest came to me and she stopped. I don't know what she saw in my face, but she said, "You look like you could use a special blessing." And she blessed me. And to me it felt like the clouds had opened up and God's light had shown down on me. And the hand of Jesus reached down from the sky and touched me and assured me, "I am with you. I am always with you."

It is moments like that in the church for me, more often than not, that have absolutely convinced me of the power of faith, absolutely convinced me that Jesus is real and he has risen from the dead, assured me without question, that Christ is with me always, and that Jesus calls me to follow him and to live a life, as best I can, of love. That for me is the kind of slow unfolding of a life of faith that comes to many of us. It's a life that begins at our baptism, but every day we grow into it and we come to know and

love God more. Our baptism is not only the forgiveness of sins and the promise of heaven everlasting, as it was for Delmer, it is also our welcome as beloved children of God, our assurance that God is with us. For us, as for Jesus, our faith, our baptism, our journey of love that calls us to follow Jesus, sends us out into the world because our baptism into Christ's body, doesn't only transform our interior spiritual lives, baptism transforms our outward lives in this world too. And it gives us a mission.

Our mission in this world is to share the good news of Jesus, the love of Jesus with our words and our actions, with all the people of our community. That is Christ's work of sharing God's love with a world that so needs love. In our baptism, we recognize that God's love has transformed us and assured us. We are beloved. We are cared for. We are cherished. And that has implications for us. It means wherever we go and whatever we do, God is there with us. Many people have suffered in their lives. Most of us have suffered one way or another through this pandemic that has limited so many things that we enjoyed and valued. And so many people have lost their lives. We are deeply divided as a country. We're watching in horror as a brutal war continues in Ukraine.

In our world today, people are tired and weary and broken, and it is tempting to despair. Yet, even when we are isolated and fearful, even when the pandemic has felt like a long dark night, even when we are deeply anxious about the state of the world, our baptism means that we are part of Christ's body and Jesus is with us. We are not alone. We are beloved. And because we have been loved, we have love to share. It's our mission to love. Jesus calls us to love. We must love. And love, love is what changes this world. Love is what gives us strengths to care for a world in pain. Love is what inspires us to feed the hungry, to share God's love with strangers and friends, to proclaim good news to the poor. Love is what gives us the courage to share with others, the good news of God's love.

Love is what gives you the words to speak to others who need to hear that good news. Love is what brings our diocese to this year of evangelism. Love is what brings us together today for worship. Love is what will bring presiding Bishop Curry in December to San Diego for the Good News Festival, and I hope you will join us there. That love is worth sharing. People need to know the good news of God's love. People need to experience it and realize that life has joy and meaning. People need to hear your story of faith, your story of belovedness. Love gives you a mission, because this suffering, conflicted world does not have enough love. We are baptized. We are beloved and we have love to share. So as Delmer says, "Come on in, friends. The water is fine."