

## MARKED AS GOD'S OWN FOREVER!

## Psalm 24

This morning is a day of celebration! We are celebrating All Saints Day, recognizing the saints of Marquis who have gone to glory in this past year. When you hear the word "saint," what comes to mind?

Someone who is super holy, who volunteers all their time to the church, who is at the church for any and all activities, who tithes at least 15% of their income, AND who leaves a bequest to the church on their death?? You know I am joking, because if this is the criteria for sainthood, saints would be few and far between...and my name would definitely NOT be on the list!!

The word "saint" is derived from a Greek verb whose basic meaning is "to set apart," "sanctify," or "make holy." In the history of the Old Testament religion, the idea of holiness or separateness was inherent in the concept of God. Saints, in the New Testament, are living individuals who have dedicated themselves to the worship and service of the one true God as revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ. Even the children of such parents are called "sanctified." By this definition, anyone who participates in the life of the church is a saint, because it should always be our goal to make our lives holy and pleasing to God. In a little while we will be baptizing Amelia Grace – this will mark the beginning of her entire life of being "sanctified" or "being made holy."

Listen again to verses 3 and 4 of our scripture for this morning: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully." I do not often preach from the Psalms as I tend to view them much more as acts of worship. But in looking over the potential texts for today based on the Lectionary, particularly verses 3 and 4, I thought they actually would fit for this day of recognizing the saints and Amelia Grace's baptism.

Having "clean hands" brings me right back to my own childhood. In our household, and perhaps some of yours, the general call to supper was, "Wash your hands it's time for supper! Don't forget the backs of your hands too!!" It was not unusual for some wise guy to add, "...and use soap this time!" Just thinking about our grubby little hands makes me wonder how we ever survived childhood. We certainly would not have by today's hand washing standards!! Public health experts are forever teaching that one of the best disease-prevention techniques is also the simplest: the very one mom insisted on. Good old soap and water does the trick, as long as we devote proper time and attention to the task. One suggestion for the 'proper time' length to wash one's hands is to sing the Happy Birthday song! Happy Birthday to you! Of course, now we even follow good old soap and water with hand sanitizers.

Even churches are getting into the hand-washing act. The Roman Catholic faith tradition of my childhood had us dipping our fingers into the holy-water font upon entering the sanctuary to remind us of our baptism. Many churches now have an antibacterial hand-wash dispenser in the

narthex which is becoming part of many worshipers' Sunday-morning routine. I have long incorporated using a sanitizer before consecrating the bread for Holy Communion, and here at Marquis we recently added a hand sanitizer station for your use prior to receiving Communion.

We may think we have invented this phenomenon as a consequence of our heightened awareness of contagious diseases – hand-washing before worship is actually an ancient practice. God was asking the same question, long before mom was: "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" asks the author of Psalm 24. Only "those who have clean hands and pure hearts." The Lord's hill, of course, is Mount Zion, the location of the temple. It is holy because the Lord chose it to be so – as the Lord is entitled to do, being the sole proprietor of heaven and earth (v. 1).

God insists on cleanliness for all who enter the temple courts – but not just ordinary, physical cleanliness. The Hebrew word, *naqi* (here translated "clean"), literally means "innocent" or "unmarried" – even "virginal." And I could think of no one more innocent and of pure heart than little Amelia Grace. Does this mean she does not require a spiritual cleansing? Not at all. The cleansing which comes from the waters of Baptism is part of the process of making her holy.

As United Methodists, we believe the Sacrament of Baptism marks the beginning of a person's faith journey within the family of God. When we are baptized we are formally welcomed into our community of faith and it is here that we begin our journey with Jesus. It makes no difference whether you were baptized as an adult or as a child; we all start on that journey at baptism. For the child, the journey begins in the nurturing community of the church, where he or she learns what it means that God loves you.

This morning we come to participate in and celebrate the Baptism of Amelia Grace Mick. Believe it or not, Baptism is one of those "hot" button issues in Christianity. In our denomination we baptize infants, as do our sister churches, the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. Yet in and among our shared ceremonies lies some controversy. The basic tension is this: while the majority of United Methodists fully support infant baptism, there are some, even Pastors, who believe this should be the personal decision of the individual being baptized.

This basic difference in opinion lies in our understanding of what Baptism is and does for a person. As United Methodists, Baptism is one of our two Sacraments, the other being Holy Communion, by which we receive grace through the Holy Spirit. From the early days of the church, baptism was associated with the mystery that surrounds God's action in our lives. Just as we cannot rationally explain why God would love us "while we were yet sinners" and give his only begotten Son that we should not perish but have eternal life, grace is yet another example of God's activity in our lives.

There is a further reason we celebrate infant baptism as United Methodists. Baptism marks God's initiative in the process of our salvation. John Wesley preached "prevenient grace," the grace that works in our lives before we are aware of it, bringing us to faith. From the earliest times, children and infants were baptized and included in the church. Jesus' words, "Let the little children come to me...for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14) is believed to be the Biblical basis for infant baptism. In truth, it has only been in the last 500 years or so that adult baptism came into being. Until the Reformation, every person was baptized as an infant. But like many today, the leaders of the Reformation believed that baptism should be the choice of the individual.

Hear me clearly on this...there is NOTHING wrong with this thought. It is perfectly okay for parents to decide to wait until their children are older and let baptism be their choice. In truth baptism is not even required for salvation. It is not magic, it has no guarantee that your child will have a happy childhood. Again, it is a means of grace and marks the beginning of a lifelong journey of faith.

In thinking about the meaning of Baptism, something recently occurred to me. I believe in the discussion of infant versus adult baptism, people confuse Baptism with making a profession of faith. As we baptize Amelia Grace, we are in no way stating that she has become a Christian through her baptism. With her baptism, she begins her life in our community of faith here at Marquis Memorial UMC. Amelia still needs to decide for herself as she grows and is taught and nurtured in this community to choose to accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

Also, while I am the one who pours the water over Amelia's head and speak the words of baptism, it is God who baptizes her, not me. Consequently, we believe that baptism is forever. At no time in Amelia's future life should she be required to be re-baptized. There are some churches that require a person to be baptized in their denomination before they can join the church. We recognize and welcome the baptism of any other Christian denomination because of our belief that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who does the baptizing. Requiring a person to be baptized again is like saying God didn't do the job right the first time!

Finally, it is through our baptism that we are cleansed of sin and made clean before God. And, here many people will argue, "How can a little sweet thing like Amelia be called a sinner?" Well friends, the stark truth of the matter is that we are all born into sin and trust me, if you are a parent, you don't have to go back very far in the life of your child to remember their first temper tantrum! Or...if you need more proof of this, I suggest you spend an hour at a day care center or pre-school. You will quickly see evidence of our sinful human condition!!

Congregation, you also have a part in Amelia's faith journey. By your participation in this service you are all making a promise to her to nurture her in the faith and show her what it means to love and know Jesus. Amelia should be so loved in her church that she will never ever question God's love for her.

Whenever the church baptizes anyone, it is a radical and controversial thing we do. There is an ancient tradition that goes, “when you save the life of a person, when you rescue them from drowning or death, you are bound to them forever”. That is what we do in baptism: we have saved this person's life; we have claimed the person for Christ.

So, to tie it all together, as United Methodists, we believe Baptism is a means of grace. It is through grace that we are drawn to God through the Holy Spirit. Through her baptism, Amelia Grace becomes officially part of the family of God. Baptism does not make her a Christian, but through the sacrament of Baptism, Amelia becomes marked as God’s own forever. The ultimate decision to follow Jesus will always be her choice. Today, her Mom and Dad are making a commitment to Amelia, in speaking on her behalf, to raise her in the church and give her every possible opportunity to know Jesus and to come to love Him with all her heart, soul, mind and strength.

Let us now turn to the baptism of Amelia Grace!!