

“Pastor, I think it’s time. I’d like to be baptized”

These are not words you hear every day. They are certainly words that you don’t hear enough. But let me tell you, when they appear in a conversation, it is one of the most delightful things to happen.

Today, in a few short minutes, we get to witness the baptism of Liz, someone who has only been coming to Faith for a little while, but it didn’t take long for her to ask to be baptized.

Last week in Acts, we heard of the Ethiopian man who was reading Isaiah but needed it explained, and Philip took the chance to explain the Gospel to him, leading right to his request for baptism. This week we heard Peter preaching to the crowds, to Gentiles whom the apostles at first weren’t sure what to do with—but as Peter preached the Word of Christ to them, of His life and death and resurrection, while he is still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on those who heard. They were praising God in their own tongues, rejoicing in the mercy that God had shown to them through this man who is God, Jesus—He is Lord. So Peter proclaims—“can anyone withhold water for baptizing these who have received the Spirit just as we have?”

When Liz asked to be baptized, a similar thought crossed my mind—“who am I to say no?”—even though she had only been with us a short while.

Once the Gospel has pierced through the pain and brokenness of this world, and the sin in our own hearts, why wait? It’s clear that God has changed the hearts of all these people, from Acts, and Liz, and to you and me. The love of God has worked—He has chosen us, speaking to us, working on us, convincing us of His goodness and truth and beauty, of His grace and mercy—the love of God is effective and we are changed so we get baptized, or a baptism many years ago works this change in us as God chooses us and calls us then just as He does when an adult converts to Christianity.

We are loved by God, and we are then invited to live in that love, or rather, abide in His love, for all our days.

Abide in His love, which means remembering His love and rejoicing in it; it means participating in it by following His commands and loving His Church and His world. It is both active, something we join in on, and passive, something done to us, but, in both ways, it is an engaging thing, something that addresses us and changes us and comforts us. His love is ours to dwell in throughout our time here on earth until the day when either we die or He returns, after which we

will still abide in His love, but then fully realized—felt, seen, heard, smelt, tasted, understood—and at last His love is ours for the rest of eternity.

All of this sounds delightful and surprisingly easy and straightforward—so why don't people flock to the church for this gift and why don't people who have heard it once stick with it all their days?

Who wouldn't want to abide in the love of God?

There are those who are stuck on the offense of the Gospel—that our sin, which separated us from God, had to be paid for by the blood of Christ on the cross, and that this gift is freely given. They don't feel like they need this love and forgiveness to be okay, or they don't think it should be this easy, so they carry on their merry way.

Or there are those who find themselves distracted by the cares of life and forget the need to abide, that is to hear it and receive it and participate in it over and over again.

Our sinful nature, which is put under in baptism as our new selves are born again, born of God rising from the waters, our sinful nature persists, so we will become offended by God's Word, or we will forget it or ignore it. The sin in us would rather abide apart from God, where it doesn't need to love others or follow Him. So we should not be surprised when we find ourselves not abiding. But the cure for that, when we wander from this home God has made for us in His love, it is to hear of this love once again, to receive it, to be forgiven, to take your seat at the table, to have in your hands and your ears and your heart once more the Gospel-gift that first convinced you that your God is good.

How is it, though, that our God is able to put up with us going back and forth like this? Acting a sinner one day, and repenting and praying to do better the next; loving our neighbour in one situation and then resenting them only moments later; rejoicing in God and then seeming like you've just forgotten about Him. Abiding now but not in a minute, at home and then wandering far away?

Why does God, who has made such a perfect place and promise for us to abide in, have patience for us who can't make up our mind and stick with Him?

The love that sought us out at the first knew what kind of persistent sinners we were and would be until our dying day, so His grace in welcoming us into this home of His love doesn't run out once we've been baptized and called

children of God. No, this grace persists, the love of God endures long beyond our conversion as we still struggle with our sin and our selfishness and wrestle to be righteous as He is.

This love persists because it is unlike anything that we can ask for or imagine. We are loved by Christ just as He is loved by His Father.

Perfectly. Infinitely. Joyfully. Unconditionally.

I love you just as my Father loves me. This is a bold statement from Christ. Jesus, who is eternally God just like the Father, One with Him in the Trinity and completely united with Him in divine being and power and wisdom and will. God the Father loves Him as much as love can be given.

And Jesus loves us the same way.

This is love that is not just spoken of in sentimentalities, but it's demonstrated as He takes on our flesh to save us who rebelled against Him. He shed His blood so that ours did not need to flow for our sins. He has felt every pain and sorrow and temptation that we have known—He has come to abide with us who have forsaken Him, and in turn, we are now able and invited to abide in this perfect, infinite, unending love.

His love that is yours when life is hard and you don't know the way forward—He is present.

His love that is yours when your sins overwhelm you—He is forgiving.

His love that is yours when the world and the devil are threatening you—His is powerful and protecting.

His love that is yours when you want to share His love but don't know the words to say or the actions to do or you're just afraid—He is with you and bearing His loving fruit through you.

His love that is yours even when you come face to face with death—He is your life and your resurrection.

By His grace and His mercy, you are loved by God so perfectly that you are brought in and forgiven, invited to simply abide. By His same grace and mercy, you are loved by God so perfectly that He will watch over you and be with you that you may abide, all your days.

In His name, Amen.