

“Bringing People Together” – Andy Wing, 11.15.09

My week was challenging this week. Maybe yours was too. At some points during the week, I wondered if I was up to the challenge. You may not have felt that way this week, but I bet there are weeks before where you could express those sentiments. In our scripture reading today from Hebrews let us hear words for us in times when we may not feel adequate and remember that Jesus Christ our high priest is our hope in those times.

### **Hebrews 10:11-25**

**<sup>11</sup>And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup>But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” <sup>13</sup>and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” <sup>14</sup>For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.**

**<sup>19</sup>Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup>Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

There have always been rough weeks. In the time of the Old Testament, when the people had a rough week, they would go down to the temple, to have the priest offer a sacrifice on their behalf. There they were in good company – presentable to each other, since they were all in the same boat of being indebted to God, and presentable to God through the assurance of forgiveness when the sacrifices were made. The only problem was that day after day, week after week, new sacrifices had to be offered, and new assurance of forgiveness sought.

Whatever kind of week we’ve had this week, we have Jesus, who has made us presentable to God and to each other, by dying for us. Our reading from Hebrews exhorts us to be confident that we’re presentable.

**“we have a great priest over the house of God” <sup>22</sup>let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.**

We baptize and confirm our youth today with water that symbolizes this “pure water of Jesus” and bring them into this community where we are all in the same boat before God.

### **God’s grace makes us presentable.**

The promises we receive in baptism are wonderful promises that draw us together. In baptism, we remember that we are included in Jesus’ once and for all sacrifice.

Our Presbyterian constitution has a lot to say about all the things baptism represents. There are many scriptural images besides the image of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. The Constitution wants us to think about several scriptural images.

Think about the waters at creation. The waters of baptism become a symbol of new creation for us. Think about the waters that crashed over the world in the flood. When we baptize, we remember that God will never condemn the world in such a way. Though water can

be destructive, it means forgiveness as well. Think about when God parted the Red Sea, so that the people could pass through the water to go on to freedom and to move into the promised land. We pass through the waters of baptism to go to this freedom in Christ. Think about all these images of water as the waters of baptism are poured out.

These waters of baptism are also like circumcision was in the Old Testament, binding the families of Israel together with a common bond. We as a church are bound together by the common bond of baptism in Jesus Christ our high priest who purifies us once and for all. We have a common bond and it's important to meet together.

The first time I remember this togetherness aspect of baptism sinking in for me was while taking a class on baptism at my seminary. For a class excursion, we visited a Pentecostal church. Our host, one of the ministers at the church, was to talk about what baptism meant in the Pentecostal church, so that we could come to understand the differences. In his talk, he began to talk also about speaking in tongues and why Pentecostals put such importance on that act. He said the purpose of speaking in tongues is to bring people together. As he continued to talk, I saw that he viewed every aspect of the church through the lens of bringing people together. Baptism is especially meant to bring people together.

As I looked at the big picture, I applied this lens to our tradition. The image of people coming together. An infant or new believer comes together spiritually with a church in baptism. This is quite an image of initiation. "We are a community that only God could have called together, serving as a priesthood to point towards the presence of God's kingdom in the world." This person is initiated into this congregation and this worldwide visible and invisible church.

There are some denominations that demand rebaptism for those who want to enter into their congregations. Our denomination does not; in fact we urge people not be re-baptized but to trust that if they have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even if they don't remember it, they have been blessed by their baptism already. The Pentecostal minister had been a Seventh Day Adventist minister at one point in his life but left because he believed it was wrong of the Seventh Day Adventist church to require rebaptism.

My brother told me a few years ago, while he was at a conference with his college church, he was baptized again as an adult in the hotel pool. When he told about it, it made me a little sad to think that he did not think his infant baptism was sufficient. While talking with him again the other night we talked about how faithful God was to us in our very early years. He remembered, when he was five years old singing and really meaning and feeling the words "come into my heart Lord Jesus...Come in today; come in to stay; come into my heart Lord Jesus." He told me it had been a long time since had thought about his childhood faith. I told him that we claim moments like that as the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit, and baptism is a sign and symbol of that kind of working too. We have faith that God is working in us whether we have already received the water of baptism or not. The key is God's faithfulness to us, not the water itself.

When I was born my father was a seminary student. He tells me that when they handed me to him as a newborn infant, he held me up in dedication and said, "Lord, this child belongs to you." I was baptized a short time later in the Britain's Cove Presbyterian Church in Weaverville, NC by my grandfather William Thomas Wing Jr. My other grandfather was an elder in this church. Though I have never been a member of this church, only a periodic visitor when visiting my grandparents, this congregation has done more for my Christian formation than any other church. They have always encouraged me. When I let them know that I would be attending

seminary, they decided to give me generous financial assistance. They still send birthday cards to me, and now to Stephanie as well, letting us know they keep us in their prayers.

As a church we take vows to nurture the faith of the one's we baptize. This means that you all have to see to it that these youth get the best Christian education that we can provide. It means digging into your pockets to support the work and ministries of this church, especially in nurturing the youth. This means encouraging our children to meet together regularly, to come and be active in church and church ministries, and to lead them by example. When you see them outside of church, you remind them that they were baptized here and tell them to remember their identity as Christians. When it comes time for them to make life decisions, it is your job to help them think Christianly about those decisions. When we baptize these youth, we remember our own baptism and how our first congregations took vows to nurture us. Let us be thankful for the support we as individuals have gotten and covenant to provide the same loving nurture and support to the children of this church.

There is no better charge that I can give than the one that our reading from Hebrews gives today: **<sup>23</sup>Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.** In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.