

The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Genesis 18:20-32 |
| <i>Response</i> | Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me. |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 138:1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Colossians 2:12-14 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | You have received a Spirit of adoption, through which we cry, Abba, Father. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | Luke 11:1-13 |

The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through Paul's cosmic epistle to the Colossians. And in this passage, we're going to actually focus on the cosmic reality of the old and new creation, but with reference to a very specific issue. And that is the nature of baptism. What is the nature of baptism? Now, in this case, I'm going to take a little bit of liberty here. I'm going to back up one verse before the lectionary. The lectionary is Colossians 2:12-14. I want to back up to verse 11, just because it's actually a pretty crucial verse for understanding the context of everything Paul's going to say in the verses selected for today. Because in that first verse, Paul's going to draw an analogy explicitly between baptism, which is the subject of the passage, and circumcision from the old covenant. So let's see what it says. Colosians 2, I'm reading verse 11 down to 14:

In him also...

meaning in Christ

you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ;

and here is where the lectionary picks up.

and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your

flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.¹

You should be able to see really quickly why I added verse 11 in here because verse 11, what Paul does—it is a very consequential verse. He makes clear that baptism, which he's about to describe, is what he calls “a circumcision made without hands”, “the circumcision of Christ”. Now, what he means by that last expression is not the circumcision that Christ experienced, that Jesus experienced when he was a baby when Mary and Joseph had brought him up to be circumcised on the eighth day. What he means is the circumcision that belongs to Christ, meaning the circumcision that is given to those who are in Christ. Now, namely, one made without hands. What does he mean without hands? It means it's not a physical fleshly circumcision, like was required of Jewish males in the Old Testament. According to Genesis 17, on the eighth day, every Jewish male, every baby would have the flesh of his foreskin removed as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, between God and his people.

So here in Colossians 2, Paul's saying that if you're in Christ, you were circumcised, whether you knew it or not, but you were circumcised with the circumcision not made with hands. You were circumcised with the circumcision of Christ. When? How? Where? When “you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Alright. So pause there. So Paul's moving quickly as he's want to do here. And he's assuming a lot as he's also want to do and so I just want to unpack it here. What Paul's doing is describing baptism, the immersion in water, through which a person is united to Christ, as a kind of new circumcision. As a new circumcision. And the reason he can describe it that way is because he doesn't just see baptism as a kind of public profession of faith in Christ, or even as a kind of incorporation into the local Christian community, although it could function those ways.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

He sees baptism as a death and a resurrection. He sees baptism as a transition from one sphere of reality into another sphere of reality, from the old creation into the new creation. And he's going to make this clear as you go through the letter of the Colossians, you can't see it from the selection that we have in the lectionary this week. But as you read through Colossians, this is going to be a major theme. And so what Paul's doing is assuming that you'll understand that according to him, circumcision, fleshly circumcision, is something that belongs to the old creation because it belonged to the old covenant. And those who are now in Christ, don't just belong to the new covenant, they also belong to the new creation because through baptism, they died to the old world and then they were raised with Christ.

So Paul's point here is that, although you were once dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, so he is talking about Gentiles before they were baptized, they were uncircumcised in their flesh and they're living in a state of sin. The people of Colossae, to whom he is writing the letter, are predominantly former pagans. They're former Gentiles. In fact, the city of Colossae was known for being a kind of hotbed of pagan syncretism. They had lots of different cults, lots of different gods and goddesses, lots of mystical expressions of religion that were found there in that city. So Paul's addressing these former pagans and saying, look, you used to be dead in your sin. You used to be uncircumcised in your flesh, but now you're not only alive with Christ, you've also been circumcised. But it's not the same kind of circumcision as in the old covenant. It's a circumcision made without hands that was given to you when you were baptized, when you were put to death with Christ and raised with him through baptism, and as a result of that baptism, all your trespasses, Paul says, have been forgiven. And the bond that stood against all of us with its legal demands has been nailed to the cross.

A very powerful image for the debt of the law being paid by Christ on the cross. So as anyone familiar with the Gospel accounts are aware, the Romans would frequently nail a placard to crosses that would often have the charge or the accusation, the legal charge for which the person was crucified, for which the person was executed. So for example, Jesus has the placard, the Titulus, as it's called in Latin, that says, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." So his charge was one of sedition, of claiming to be a king in opposition of Caesar. So he is put to death for that. So Paul takes that same image of a placard, and he says those legal charges of the law against us, all the debt of our sins that we've

accumulated, that merit death for us, Christ took it and he nailed it to the cross. He canceled the debt by nailing it to the cross.

And this is something again, Paul, he's so sophisticated. He's also so Jewish. He thinks like a rabbi. So in the rabbinic tradition, if you look at the writings of the rabbis in the Mishnah and all, one of the things that they will frequently say is that not only does suffering atone for sin and almsgiving atones for sin, but also death can atone for sin. So a sinner who suffers a painful death, in the rabbinic tradition would be seen as part of the expiation required for sin. Death itself had an atoning power. And so what Paul's doing is kind of taking all those metaphors and swirling them into one and saying, Christ took your debt, the debt of your trespass and sin, and he took the charges against you and he nailed them to his cross, and thereby canceled the debt. He atoned for the sin. He brought about redemption through the blood of his cross. He says that earlier in Colossians 1. So by virtue of your baptism, what baptism is a participation in his death and resurrection. And because of that, it not only atones for sin, brings about forgiveness of sins, but it also raises you up and allows you to partake in the new creation and the joy of the resurrection.

So that's the basic thrust of the passage. Now, that's all absolutely clear as far as I'm concerned, that's just what the text says. I'm going to add one element to it. This passage is one reason that some interpreters of Colossians, some scholars, argue that the opponents that Paul's addressing in the letter to the Colossians are, at least, if not identical to, they're saying the same kind of thing his opponents in Galatians were saying. Remember, in the letters to the Galatians, another polemical epistle of Paul. Paul's writing against people who were saying that Gentiles have to be circumcised in order to be saved. And Paul says, no way. He's very clear. You do not. All that's necessary is baptism and faith. Faith and baptism. Those are sufficient. You don't need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

A case can be made from Colossians 2, that he's actually addressing the same issues here, same opponents. Because you can infer from it that some people were saying that you needed to be circumcised in your flesh in order to be justified. And Paul says, No, you don't because you've already been circumcised by a circumcision made without hands when you were baptized. And it was that that canceled the debt against you. It was that that brought about the forgiveness of sin. It was that that ushered you into the resurrection, the new life of the resurrection

and canceled the bond of trespasses against you. Therefore, there's no need for a fleshly circumcision when you've already received the circumcision without hands. That is the new circumcision of baptism into Christ. I think that's correct. I think that the letter of the Colossians is actually likely written against the circumcision faction, the same party that was causing Paul problems in Galatians. Paul's having to correct those errors in Colossae as well, and make clear that circumcision is not necessary for salvation, all that is necessary is faith in Christ and baptism.

What's the significance of this passage? Apart from its profound theology of baptism, this passage in Colossians 2, when you throw in verse 11 like I did at the beginning there, is actually one of the main texts, one of the foundational texts, for the early Christian practice of the baptism of infants. So to this day, especially in Christian communities derived from the Protestant reformation, there are Christians who think that infants should not be baptized. There are Christians who object to infant baptism and say that in order to be baptized, receive the grace of baptism, you have to be old enough to have reached the age of reason and be able to accept Christ for yourself as your personal Lord and savior. And there are a number of arguments that would be made in favor of rejecting infant baptism.

But one of the reasons that ancient Christians in both the east and the west did not reject infant baptism is because in ancient Christianity, it was recognized that baptism wasn't just a public profession of faith, baptism was a mystery through which a person participated in the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. And that baptism was a new circumcision, that baptism is the new covenant analogy to circumcision in the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament, you did not have to reach the age of reason in order to be given the grace of entry into the covenant. Entry into the covenant was a gift that was given to infants as young as eight days old. Therefore, if baptism is a new circumcision, a circumcision made without hands, then it's fitting and reasonable that it would not be withheld from infants. Otherwise, the grace of God in the Old Testament would be more inclusive than the grace of God and the New Testament. So if you want an example of this, you can listen to the words of Saint Cyprian of Carthage. So Saint Cyprian was the Bishop of Carthage, a major Roman city in Northern Africa, in the middle of the third century A.D. And so in this letter on infant baptism, here's how Saint Cyprian argued in favor of the North African practice of baptizing infants in the third century. Here's what he wrote:

[A]s for the fact that among the Jews *circumcision of the flesh* was observed on the eighth day, that was but a holy sign, an anticipatory image, a prefiguring given in prophecy which has been brought to reality and fulfillment with the coming of Christ... *That image has ceased now that the reality has superseded it and we have been given circumcision of the spirit. And that is the reason why, in our view, no one is to be prevented from obtaining grace...* Rather, every man without exception has the right to be admitted to the grace of Christ.... *No one is denied access to baptism and grace. How much less reason is there then for denying it to an infant who, being newly born, can have committed no sins. The only thing that he has done is that, being born after the flesh as a descendant of Adam, he has contracted from that first birth the ancient contagion of death...*

What we would call Original Sin

And so, ...our verdict at the Council was this: *we ought not to be the cause for debarring anyone from access to baptism and the grace of God, for He is merciful, kind, and loving toward all men.*²

So, really clear profound statement of Saint Cyprian that already in the third century there were some people questioning whether baptism should be restricted to adults. And Cyprian, and apparently a number of other bishops, met in council at Carthage, and one of the things they decided was no, baptism cannot be denied to infants because baptism is, as St. Paul says, circumcision in the spirit. It's a circumcision not made without hands. And therefore if circumcision was not denied, and the grace of the old covenant was not denied infants in the Old Testament, how much more should the new circumcision, circumcision of the spirit, not be denied to infants in the new covenant as well? It's a very fitting, very powerful argument from what we might call sacramental typology. So, although it's true that if you look at the New Testament, there's no verse that says, "Go out and baptize infants," explicitly, you can make an argument, an inferential argument from Paul's theology of circumcision as prefiguring baptism and baptism as a new circumcision, that it's fitting to give baptism to infants. And in fact, the reality is, if you look at the book of the Act of the Apostles, for example, chapter 16, verses

² Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter 64.4.3-6.1*; trans. G. W. Clarke.

30-31, when the Gentile jailer converts, it says, "He and his whole household were baptized." His entire *oikos*. That would mean him, his wife, his children, his servants, everyone in the household would be baptized. And that expression of the baptism of entire households is something that happens on more than one occasion in the Acts of the Apostles. And so apart from any explicit statement that the entire household was baptized, except for the babies or except for the infants, or except for the young children, the presumption is that when whole households are baptized, everyone was baptized: adults, young adolescents, and children as well, especially in those kind of extended households. So this is just one example of the role that the letter to the Colossians has played in the sacramental theology of the church. To recognize that baptism can be given to infants, not just because we want God's grace to be given to them, not just because they shouldn't be excluded from the grace of new covenant, but because baptism, as St. Paul says, is a circumcision not made with hands.