

Jennifer and I had a great experience being present for our granddaughter Ruthie Virginia's baptism in western NC last Sunday. Ruthie was so alert and curious and peaceful, just watching everything, and taking it all in. And I know I was too. So often being the *officiant* at baptisms myself, there is a responsibility involved there that calls me to be very focused in my attention, as a servant of the sacrament itself, so that the baptism does in fact happen as it should. With Ian and Catherine's Methodist pastor officiating then I was able to stand with them and take the whole thing in a way that I usually cannot easily do.

And what I really noticed and have been reflecting on, as Ruthie was held before that congregation, was that she was encircled by so much real love—of all the family standing nearby her—and of all the members of the congregation who came up to her before and afterwards. And that, on a very practical level, what made that baptismal moment possible, was all the detail-oriented love of Ruthie's parents, Ian and Catherine, who so carefully and continuously, in the midst of all their other work and responsibilities, attend to Ruthie's daily care, with affection and all the endurance that such care takes. In other words, baptism affirms and invites the importance of...the human loves in our lives...that help make us a person with our own capacity for loving. So, in her baptism, I could witness again for myself just how elemental and crucial human love really is. And in the baptisms of Hudson and Ayla Gertner here yesterday, I was able to witness the same importance of such love.

And I have also been reflecting on how baptism...especially of infants and young children...who are not yet able to respond...is such a powerful sacrament of God's love. *Before* Ruthie, or Ayla, or Hudson, or any of us...are even able to have beliefs and faith in God...the sacrament of baptism announces God's love for each specific person.

There is an old theological term for this which is called "prevenient grace"...which is a way of talking about God's love for us...a love which completely precedes even our ability to recognize and respond to God. Or, as the First Letter of John says: "In this is *love*, not that *we* loved God, but that *God* loved us...We love because God *first* loved us." And that incredible generosity of divine love, that pure goodness of the divinity, is why we have a word called "grace". Grace means there is no darkness or shadow in God. There is no human *quid pro quo* in God of "I will only love you, if you love me." "Grace" is a word easily said, and yet, the proclamation of God's grace in baptism and preaching and loving is *astonishing*. And that is why baptism, even in all its familiarity, is in fact an astonishing act.

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But I have to also say this...that there is something about living in the world...that tries to turn God's grace into something...*less* than astonishing. The more we encounter the conditions placed upon us for love by others...and we ourselves place upon others conditions for love...the more likely we are to make God over into *our* own image...and lose our ability to imagine that God...is in fact immeasurably better than us...and more loving. And the more we encounter...all kinds of ideas in human culture that consider any kind of belief in God...to be utterly naïve...then the more we may wonder ourselves if God's love...is only a childish thing best set aside...so we can be grownups. And the more we encounter...and participate...in evils in this world...the more we may think the goodness of God pales...in comparison with...the loud and palpable evils among us. And the more we hear even religious people...speak with hate...and act without love...the more we may wonder if God too is both loving and unloving, ready to "turn on a dime" toward vindictiveness and vengeance. And let's be honest, with the Bible comprising voices of our ancestors in the faith over a long period of around 2000 years, the Bible does not easily have a consistent witness...about whether or not God is in fact...absolutely good and loving—or not.

And yet, the testimony of John is utterly clear in our scripture today: *God is love. And so we too must love.* No "if's and's or but's". When we do *not* love then we do *not* reflect God. When we *do* love then we "abide in God and God abides in us."

Even when John speaks of God using the metaphor of a vinegrower who must necessarily remove barren branches from the vine so that the vine may best be fruitful, this teaching is less about us than God. It is teaching that nothing unloving...nothing cruel...nothing evil...can attach itself to God—God was and is and ever shall be all love.

That which is not love has no future. *That is the judgment that falls upon us all.*

God's love is the only future. *That is the hope that calls us all.*

The future of Ruthie...of Hudson and Ayla...of all our children and grandchildren...of you and me...of this world of politics and nature...our future does not ultimately reside within ourselves...and does not completely depend upon ourselves...even while we are called to do our part.

And our future most certainly is not ultimately captive to all that is not loving in the world or within ourselves.

But the future belongs to God...who is...absolutely good...loving...beautiful...and can be trusted...without fear...and in peace.

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Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon *us* your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised *us* to the new life of grace. Sustain *us*, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give *us* an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, Holy Baptism, p. 308)