
Remember Your Baptism: You Are a Holy Child of God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
All Saints' Sunday – Year C

Do you remember your baptism? Probably many of you don't, because you were baptized as babies, like these children today: Bailey, Anna, and Carter; and Eva, Jaira, Carter, Archie, Robert, and Layla. I was too, so all I really remember are the pictures—especially this one snapshot of me, propped up in a velvety orange chair, with my grandfather's christening gown cascading around me.

Maybe that's why I love hearing the story again—my story, our story—every time a new saint is baptized in this church, or an older saint recalls their baptism story.

One of my favorite of those stories is the one Howard Thurman tells in his autobiography. [\[i\]](#) He was an African-American mystic, professor, and preacher, whose thought greatly influenced the Civil Rights Movement. Raised by a Christian mother and grandmother, he presented himself at age twelve to the deacons of his church to be baptized. They didn't think he was Christian enough yet and told him to come back when he could convince them otherwise, with a compelling conversion story.

When he told his grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, she decided to present him, herself: she took his hand and marched him right back up to that church and informed those deacons that Thurman was a Christian long before coming to them, and that they were going to take him into the church, right away!

Apparently, she was quite persuasive, because on a Sunday soon after, “*everybody*,” Thurman recalls, gathered at that same church, and processed with him, by foot and bicycle, down to the Halifax River, where he was carried out into the water, held by the minister, and dunked, or baptized, in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Ghost. And all the people said, “Amen!”

But that wasn't the end of the story, and this wasn't a stand-alone ceremony. Thurman really did receive a new identity—what he calls a “*fontal* sense of worth that could not be destroyed.” [\[ii\]](#) And he really did receive a new community and family: he was welcomed into this church and supported by its elders, who taught him how to pray and raise a hymn, and held him accountable to the faith he proclaimed, and showed him that he was and would always be a holy child of God, so what he did with his life mattered.

Whenever his grandmother sensed this awareness flagging in her grandchildren, she'd gather them around and tell this story from her life as a slave. Twice a year, they would be allowed to have a local slave preacher preach to them. No matter the topic, his sermons always ended with a dramatic pause. He would scrutinize each person's face, and say, “You are not what they say you are! You are not slaves! You are God's children!” When she got to that part of the story, Thurman recalls, there would be a slight stiffening in her spine, as the children sucked in their breath. This was an awesome Gospel, indeed.

It had sustained her through slavery and beyond, and it would root Thurman, too, as he journeyed through life—inoculating him, as it were, against both the indignities he'd face during Jim Crow, and the accolades he'd receive as an esteemed professor and preacher. And like his grandmother, he was compelled to share the good news: to recognize the

dignity of all people, and to seek to love even oppressors and enemies into the awareness that they, too, are holy children of God.

In a few minutes, we'll baptize these new saints. They will be presented by parents and godparents who, like Thurman's grandmother, see the light of Christ in them already, and will help them grow into the full stature of Christ. And *everyone*, all of us, will promise to support them.

Then, they'll be carried to this font, and a priest will pour water over them, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the celebrant will take some holy oil, or chrism, and sign the cross on their foreheads, calling them *each* by name and saying, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

I suspect that that's one of the reasons you're having these children baptized: because you want them to know that--that they are holy children of God; that God loves them, and so do we; that they have an identity and dignity and belonging in Christ that cannot be destroyed.

Isn't this what it means to remember your baptism? Not necessarily to recount all the details—who was wearing what, or how loudly you cried--, but to remember that *you* have been marked as Christ's own forever, and to remember the promises you made and are still growing into. Especially on this All Saints Sunday, remembering your baptism means remembering also the saints who brought you to faith and nurtured you in it. And remembering the communion of saints: the communion we have, in Christ, with God and one another, and with Christians across time and around the world.

In the biblical understanding, "remembrance" means to bring into the present—to participate in, as a present reality in our lives. So, today, we remember. As we welcome new saints into this holy communion, as we support each other and worship together, and as we give thanks for those who have gone before us, we are embodying and participating in and proclaiming the communion of saints.

[\[i\]](#) Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 18 – 21.

[\[ii\]](#) Thurman, 18.