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Rye Presbyterian Church
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The Life Within

Texts: St. John 15:1-8; I John 4:7-21

During the baptismal service, there is a prayer of consecration said over the water just before it is used to baptize. In this prayer, places where water has played a significant role in the history of God's people are recited. In the beginning of time, God's Spirit moved over the watery chaos; during the time of Noah, God destroyed evil by the waters of the flood. In the Exodus, God led his people out of slavery into freedom through parting the waters of the Red Sea, and then led them into the promised land, by parting the waters of the River Jordan. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan.

This prayer hits just the highlights of the striking role that water and waters play in the history of salvation. There are many, many more instances that could have been given as well. The prophet Elijah tells an Assyrian official plagued with leprosy to wash in the Jordan and he is miraculously healed. Jonah flees God on a ship and a creature of the watery deep brings him back to his mission. Elijah prays and a drought, spiritual and otherwise, that plagued Israel is relieved by a deep rain. Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well, and offers her living water; he walks across the Sea of Galilee, and then another time, calms it when it threatens to capsize the boat in which he and the disciples are sailing. In his death, from his side come blood and water.

All of these stories stand in the background of the sacrament of baptism and enrich our understanding of what is meant by baptism and the life in God that baptism begins. They give the place of baptism and the life of faith a powerful imaginative grip on our thinking about God's

grace. In the sacrament of baptism we are cleansed and renewed, we are freed from moral slavery and brought to new life. The water of baptism cleanses and renews; like all water it nourishes and sustains us. Like the rain, it comes from heaven and makes us give forth and sprout, as Isaiah says. That is what God promises us in baptism, that is what we ask for when we ask for baptism for our children, and it is what we ask for when we confess our faith and affirm our baptismal promises as the confirmation class does this morning.

I would not for a moment want to give up this imaginatively powerful grip that water has on us. Yet, let me also point out that it falls short of saying just *how* grace works in our lives. For the outer material sign of water in baptism signals cleansing, new life, and nourishment, but it does not show nearly so well the inner spiritual grace that is given in the sacrament that actually gives us new life. For, in the final analysis, the grace that sustains us and gives us life always works from within, even if it starts in an outer moment such as the pouring of water. Working from within, it works silently, mysteriously, and in an unseen way. For this reason, I have always been deeply puzzled by those who at baptisms are obsessed with taking pictures during the ceremony. You can't take a picture of what is really going on at that moment, because it can't be seen.

But that doesn't mean that we can't say something about what goes on as a result of baptism or about that unseen grace. For in baptism, we are not simply cleansed, renewed and set on our way. In baptism, as the Christian church has always understood it, those things happen because, most importantly of all, we are joined to Christ – really joined, intimately, and at the center of our being. Thus it is Christ himself gives us the most significant image of all of the Christian faith that begins in baptism, when he says, “Abide in me as I abide in you...I am the vine and you are the branches.” It is because of this deep organic relationship, of life that is

drawn from a source that is outside us but that runs through us, that we are given life from the inside, just as the branches get their life from the vine. Just as the branches bear fruit because of the life they derive from the vine, so, too, with the life of faith. It comes from the vine, and its fruit is the result of the vine.

This is the sum of what God wants from humankind and what God intended when he created us. God created, and sent the prophets, and in due time, God the Son became a man and walked and talked with us, and taught us. He died and rose again. But for what? To take us into God's life, and to bring God's life into ours, transforming it, making it whole and fruitful. This is not simple companionship; faith is not a matter of "Jesus is my BFF." It is deeper and even more intimate. This is about how our lives are taken up by God, and where God's life is given to us, so that when we act and think and know from this inner life that God gives, it is God himself who is acting. God is the sap that gives us life and strength. As one saint prayed, God is the soul of my soul, and the heart of my heart.

Now, that is to put things in a very mystical way, and it *is* a mystical notion. But it is not at all mysterious or puzzling, for what underlies it all is a sort of deep certainty about God. We don't see God. Why? Because God is not "out there," a thing like other things that can be seen. No, God, who although he is beyond us, in dealing with us, chooses to do so in here, in here in our hearts, in here in our lives, and especially in the lives of those we call saints. For this reason, we can actually be more certain about God than anything else. It is possible to doubt and deny what we see with our eyes; after all, what we see might be something else, a shadow or an actor perhaps; it can be too dark to see. But the good that makes sense of our lives, we cannot deny without denying the sense of our lives or the light that is in our lives. The great American poet, Emily Dickinson, a recluse who never left her home of Amherst, Massachusetts, wrote a poem

about this certainty.

I never saw a moor;
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot,
As if the chart were given.

It is because of that certainty that we can question. The evening that the confirmation class met with the session to be received as members of this congregation, many of them expressed their appreciation for the class teaching them that they could question the faith. Now, that sounds odd, that one could profess faith after learning to question and with a future of questioning ahead. But it makes all the sense in the world. For the certainty of faith lies at such a basic, internal level that it is the ground from which you ask questions. It is what gives us a horizon within which to ask questions, a sense of care and of ultimacy that good questions aim at finding out about. Indeed, the questions put to faith, if they are the expression of a desire to know – a desire to have more and more of life and light and love, because even the very great amount that we have is still not enough – then those questions themselves are actually the movement of God's life within our minds. These then are the questions of faith seeking understanding, as Sts. Augustine and Anselm put it, of faith seeking to know its God more and more.

Yet, if the life within us is certain and deep, be aware that it can be broken and it can be lost – not because God is not faithful, nor because the springs that flow from God ever dry up.

But it can be lost and the life within you can dry up if in your questioning you no longer

seek light or truth, but use your questions to be destructive and mean, or when because of your questioning you become cynical.

The life within you dries up, too, when you lie, for Christ who is the Vine, is also the Truth, and if you take truth casually you will lose whatever truth has been in you.

And the life within you will dry up if you hate. As St. John's first letter explains so wonderfully, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God." But as John also carefully points out, "Anyone who says he loves God but hates his brother or sister is a liar." You can't love God whom you can't see, he says, if you hate the brother or sister whom you can see.

And the life within also dries up if you are indifferent, or treat it lightly.

And it dries up, if you think that you are the source of life, not God, if you try to use God for your personal projects, and don't seek the life that God would have you live.

But know, too, that the life within you can be increased. How? Well, Remember that God the Son who is our life, is also the Word that was in the beginning with God. In giving his people a church, God the Word gave his people the means to live by something other than bread alone; he gave them the means by which they could live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. How? Well, remember what the children said three weeks ago when I gave them the opportunity to do their own mission study, and to try to come up with what they think ought to go on in the church. They without failing came up with the four pillars of the church that are the four pillars of the life within: worship, prayer, study, and good works. These are what the church is for and what the church is about. It is by these things that the life within us grows. It is by taking in the Word in all its forms – reading, preaching, praying, sacraments (for Augustine said, that sacraments are simply the Word made visible) and by giving it out to the world in our love

and care, that the life within us is increased and is made certain.

For all of us, then, for all you new members of the confirmation class, therefore, remember this above all things: you are the branches and he is the Vine. Christ is that vine that gives you life. He gives you life by pouring himself into the faith that seeks him and that receives him. Remember then, above all things, to feed on him in your hearts by faith – by worship, by partaking of Christ as he gives himself for us in the sacraments and in the Word read and preached, by prayer and meditation, by study, and by loving your neighbor as yourself. If you do, the life within you will be eternal life, and you will indeed bear much fruit.