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**“Baptized in Christ”
A sermon by William R. Barron**

August 9, 2009

Psalm 78:1-7; Isaiah 43:1-3a; Galatians 3:23-29

I’m exceedingly grateful to my friend, Joe Harvard, and to the members of the Session for inviting me to preach today on this really special day for the Saldarinis and the Barrons and especially for Ruby. We are, indeed, grateful for this invitation. There are so many connections in the Presbyterian Church that you just simply can’t keep count, but there is one more that I want to recognize this morning. A mentor of mine, and I know of Joe Harvard’s, was Shirley Guthrie. He taught me Independent Study my last year in seminary. He was a dear friend. And I know that he was especially close to Joe and Joe to him. Joe baptized Tom Guthrie, who is a friend of Walt and Katy and has been for years since they were at Davidson. So just beware as the sermon unfolds: there are stories and connections galore in the Presbyterian Church.

It may surprise you that the most divisive, contentious, non-negotiable doctrine, sacrament, practice, or discipline in the history of the Christian church is baptism. Disagreement among Christians throughout history at times has been so severe that baptism has directly contributed to wars, burning at the stake, excommunication, persecution, imprisonment, the establishment of various movements, and new denominations. In modern times, in the consultation on church union, it was one of two major roadblocks that stopped that discussion. And whenever individual denominations have tried to merge and did not agree on baptism, it was an unresolved issue. There are sisters and brothers in mainline denominations who would vehemently deny that the baptismal celebration that will occur later in this service of worship is authentic. They will claim it is nothing more than a mere imitation of the right and true baptism.

It would be irresponsible to ignore that there are fiercely held differences in the family of faith. I have not come here today to defend or to persuade. But I am here primarily as a grandfather. And so, from a very personal perspective, I would like to review with you four essential tenants of the meaning of baptism from a Presbyterian perspective.

First and foremost, Ruby Lynn Saldarini Barron is a child of God. So are you, and so am I. She always has been. She always will be. We do not own our off-spring. Parents do not possess adopted children. We are given the great stewardship responsibility to manage God’s children to the glory of God. So that a parent’s primary responsibility is to so love and teach and nurture and train the child so that when maturity is reached, there will be a celebration on that child’s part on how incredibly special they are to

the One who has created them. I also believe that Katy and Walt hit the jackpot with Ruby; certainly, she with them. And, I believe that is God's intention for all parents and all children. One of life's ugliest mysteries is when parents neglect children, abuse them, or injure them. The responsibility is far more than two people can achieve as parents. And that is why, in the Presbyterian tradition, the whole community makes a promise. Later in this service, you will ask questions of children. You will be asked questions as a congregation. And you will all be committing yourselves with your various gifts to be examples for Ruby and all the baptized children that come under the care of this particular congregation. It is a responsibility that I know you do very well. Katy and Walt lost twin girls, June and Pearl. It was a time of hell for all of us: dark, difficult, and painful. Joe was a very present and empathetic pastor. The whole staff and this congregation exhibited love and tenderness. You were wise and loving, and you did not offer shallow explanations in an attempt to make something that was very painful pass away quickly. We wept together, so it is right that today, we rejoice together, believing that somehow, some way, some day, Ruby will meet her sisters all in the arms of God, who loves each of them far more than any of us could possibly imagine. The same is true for you and for me as well.

Secondly, baptism is a sacrament of grace, and nowhere is it clearer than in infant baptism. For while there is enormous disagreement on many issues within the Christian family, there is one place where we come together in unanimity. And that is our common acknowledgement that God's love for us is not based on us. It is not based on what we know or don't know; it is not based on what we do or don't do. It is wonderfully unconditional. As brilliant as Ruby is, she does not yet know God. She does not even yet know *me*, for heaven's sake! She has not engaged in a single intentional act of caring for another person, though she has brought great joy to many of us. It is because we affirm God is love. God is the initiator. We love because God first loves us. So we dare to say that God loves her now as much as God ever will, which is so expansive, and also, will never love her more than this moment. We're not going to make something happen here. It has already happened, for she is a child of God. So are you, and so am I.

Thirdly, in baptism, we acknowledge that it is personal and not generic. Baptism is not an assembly-line procedure. It is not one-size-fits-all or a vaccination that is supposed to protect the one who is baptized. Sometimes, people speak of christening and baptism as if they are synonyms, and it is easy to understand why. A christening primarily is a naming. And while we know that Ruby's name has already been given, we are acknowledging in this sacrament that she is a unique child of God.

We each want to be known, and we want to be known by our name. Our oldest grandchild is Gill. He recently celebrated his seventh birthday. He and his family were on vacation in Florida, and he went deep-sea fishing with his dad. Gill caught a large fish. He has a proud picture of standing on the dock, holding the fish up, and it is almost as big as he is. He called his mother, and he was so excited about what had happened, and she said, "Wow, Gill! That is terrific! What did everybody say?" And his voice dropped, and he said, "Mom, I don't think anybody really knows me. They just called me "Little Buddy." We all want to be known by our name in times of celebration and in times of sorrow.

I went to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., and that stone became personal for me, because there, I found the name of a high school friend, of a college classmate, of a fraternity brother. And I wept, because seeing their names reminded me of the relationship, and how important each one was in my life.

Students of scripture say that there are twenty-seven genealogies in the Bible. I trust them. When you read a genealogy, you come to a point where you want to skip over, or at least, I do; it seems a little tedious and boring to go through that long list of names. And yet, I ask you to imagine what would it be like if your name was on the list? Would you be more interested in reading it? Or the name of someone that you loved and you know loves you? We are each a unique child of God. Ruby is, you are, and so am I.

Lastly, baptism symbolizes our inclusion in God's story of salvation. My final grandchild's story is about Kate. She is Gill's sister. And she is like all of our grandchildren, and they have the ability to hold their grandparents in the palm of their hand and manipulate us like crazy. Kate is an artist at it. One time, she came, and she crawled up in my lap as I was sitting in a big chair, and she began to kind of cuddle around and get into position just where she wanted to be, and she leaned back, and she put her index finger on my cheek, and I was looking at her, and she said, "Gramp, tell me a story. Only put me in it."

Baptism is our reminder of God's wonderful story of salvation, and that we are each in it. What a story it is, that in Jesus Christ, we are all children of God through faith. We are baptized into Christ, and all the walls of separation have been torn down. There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male or female. We are one in Christ Jesus.

*I love to tell the story,
'twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and His love.*

Ruby Lynn Saldarini Barron is in it. You're in it. And I am, too. Thanks be to God.