

Sermon Feb 21, 2021
Redeemer, Ramsey
Pastor M Linderman

Grace mercy and peace from God our creator, and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Recently, in cleaning out my mother's apartment, I found an old homemade DVD that I had made of my daughter Mira's baptism. It took place now 16 years ago at Faith Lutheran Church in Lavallette, NJ, where I was a member at the time. Faith's Pastor, John Collins is a colleague of mine, and he was gracious enough to allow my father, a retired Lutheran Pastor, to do the baptism. A friend of the family, who would become my son Sam's godfather a few years later, was the videographer. There are lots of beautiful things in that video, especially since it was the first big gathering of my and Johann's families since our wedding. There are so many people gathered around, and the congregation as well, all involved in this ceremony that brought my daughter into direct contact with the promises of God, namely that God loves her, has forgiven her, and will keep her forever in the power of Jesus's life.

We were all gathered to witness, to bear witness to this moment, but especially important were the Godparents. And on this Godparent Sunday here at Redeemer, I want to lift up their role. Mira's Godparents are Johann's sister, Dolores, and my sister Lisel, and her husband Martin. So three Godparents all together! Dolores held Mira through most of the ceremony, and my sister and brother-in-law had speaking parts and the role of candle bearer.

The Godparents' job stems back to the ancient practice of baptism in the early church. At that time, many more adults were baptized than children. The process of catechesis, or instruction in the faith, began officially when you and a sponsor came to the priest or pastor to request baptism. Then, at the beginning of the following Lent, you and your sponsor would attend classes together where you would be taught to memorize, and understand, the Apostles Creed, the ten commandments, and the Lord's prayer. You would also be taught how to participate in the sacrament of Baptism, and also how to participate in the Lord's supper. After the five-week period of instruction was over, you and your sponsor would prepare for your baptism that would take place with all the other converts

at the Easter Vigil, which happened on the night before Easter. After that service, you would come back to the church on Easter morning, and the whole congregation would rejoice and give thanks for all those who had just joined the church.

Your sponsor's role throughout that process was to support you, answer your questions, learn, and in some cases relearn those tenants of the faith, and to encourage you as you progressed over the weeks of Lent. Then they stood next to you at the vigil, and spoke up for you when asked by the priest if you were sincere in your desire to become a Christian. Then after you were baptized, they would help you put on the new garment, usually a clean white robe, that symbolized your purified status in the eyes of God and the church.

Indeed, Lent was the season of preparation for Easter for everyone in the church, but for those preparing for their baptism, it was especially meaningful. The season of Lent became a season of preparation, education, and testing of knowledge, for those who were converting. It mirrored the 40-day season of trial that Jesus went through after he was baptized by John. If Jesus could be tried and tested, so could you. And in your case, your testing came before you signed the contract.

Of course, as the years went by, and after the institutionalization of the church, when it had already become the dominant form of religion in society, fewer adults came forward for baptism. Instead, the children of all those who already were Christian needed to be baptized. So catechesis had to be stretched out. There was nothing in the church's teaching which precluded children from the sacrament, but of course, they couldn't go through age-appropriate education and testing until they were old enough to understand what was at stake. Thus the practice of confirmation in adolescence became the norm inside the church.

For Godparents in our day, the role of sponsor is less active, and more honorary. Your Godparents don't go through confirmation class with you, but they should be included in your confirmation. They don't get the refresher course on the tenants of the faith, but indeed, they should. As should the whole church. For godparents are an extension of the church that reaches out directly to the newly baptized. Beyond one's own parents, Godparents make the church palpably real to growing Christians. It is their job to remind the baptized that they were indeed baptized, that it happened on a particular day, and these were the people who

were also present, and this is what happened in the ceremony, and this is what we did to celebrate afterwards. Godparents help make the baptism real, and they help keep it real in the life of the baptized. And Godparents are to make themselves available to the baptized throughout their life, answering questions as best they can, talking, relearning the faith, and also sharing their own doubts and struggles of walking faithfully in the way of Jesus.

Of course, under the godparents, there is the congregation itself, whose support for its ministries puts that congregation on the map. The support of the congregation makes it a place for more baptisms. The congregation becomes the arena for the fulfillment of all those baptismal promises that were made at the baptism ceremony, promises which the parents and Godparents also made on behalf of the newly baptized. And the congregation prays for the newly baptized in their life of faith, and for the parents and godparents in their faith formation roles as well. Thus the congregation is like the village that it takes to raise a Christian. And this whole pyramid of relationships, parents, godparents, and congregation, are all built on the presence of Christ, who promises to be in the congregation as it baptizes, just as he promises to be present in the life of the newly baptized, along with all those who were baptized long ago.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said famously that the church is to take up room in the world. He meant that the church is intended by Christ to literally take up space in the world through its living, witnessing, and serving. The church can't fade into the background of the communities it is a part of. The church contests the space of the world along with all the other forms of human institution, organization, and community that give shape to human life in the world. Sometimes, the world seems hostile to the church, and then the church is like Noah on his boat, a small spec in a wider sea of chaotic life, carrying what's essential to start over again. Other times, the church is the dominant institution in society, such as was the case for centuries in medieval Europe. And in our own day, we are beginning to understand more how the church can be present in the world at a moment that stretches it beyond its literal boundaries of official membership. The church of Christ is present wherever Christ is present, in the hearts of people whose faith in humanity, in love, in justice is inspired by a mass movement like a civil rights march, or the downfall of a dictatorship. In those moments, the church is as big as the number of hearts that God's truth inspires, whether they see Christ in those events at the time or not.

In our day, we are moving away from the period of dominance of the church, and getting closer to the situation of the church in the early days of Christianity. The larger society doesn't know the church, and its ways seem more and more strange to the unchurched. But for those of us who are called to take up space in society for God, the church is essential for our survival. Godparents are part of that occupation of space in the life of a young Christian. They take up room in your life, and they help you figure out how to occupy space in the same way the incarnate Son of God did in his earthly ministry.

And today, we ask that God would bless all Godparents, as well as those they are godparent to, that they may all continue to grow in faith and hope and love, and that they may grow ever closer to the one who has brought them together, the Lord of life, our savior Jesus Christ. In his gracious presence with the church, we are all blessed to live courageously, justly, faithfully all our days, just as we are called to hope in that day when all people will be gathered into one under the Lordship of Christ. May we be found faithful to this Gospel on that day. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.