

In the 1983 movie *Tender Mercies*, Robert Duvall plays a character named Mac Sledge. Mac is a country singer/songwriter, whose fairly successful career has nose-dived because of his alcoholism and frustrated ambitions. His fortunes begin to turn with the help of Rosa Lee, a young widow who offers him room and board at her roadside Texas motel and gas station in exchange for handyman help on the condition that he give up his drinking.

Mac and Rosa Lee develop a friendship that turns to love and eventually to marriage, and they start going to services at a rural West Texas Baptist church. After a brush with his former life that sends Mac into a near crisis, he chooses to turn away from the destructive relationships and patterns of his past, returning to his new family with a renewed interest in singing.

Shortly after that comes a quiet but crucial moment that I imagine was lost on people who didn't catch its subtle significance. Mac says to Sonny, Rosa Lee's ten-year-old son, "I've decided to get dipped with you." And then, in a modest little service, Rosa Lee watches from the choir as the minister lowers first Sonny and then Mac into the water, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is the pivotal turn for Mac's entire story.

Riding home in the truck after the baptism, Sonny says: "Well, we done it Mac, we was baptized." Sonny studies himself in the truck's rearview mirror for a beat and then says, "Everybody said I'd feel like a changed person." Like the people in Luke's story, Sonny was filled with expectation.

Then he asks Mac, "Do you feel like a changed person?" Mac looks a little uncertain. "Not yet," he says to Sonny. Then the little boy says "You don't look any different, Mac. Do you think I look any different?" A gentle laughter starts to well up in Mac as he answers: "Not yet." Rosa Lee looks at them and smiles, and that's the end of the conversation and the scene, but not the end of the story.

In a moment, as part of our celebration of the baptism of Jesus, we will renew our own baptismal vows, which makes it a good day to reflect on baptism, and what it means and doesn't mean to be baptized. For Episcopalians, baptism is not fire insurance. Hell is still an option for the baptized who choose it. Baptism is not magic. Baptism does not enchant God into loving us any more than God does

already. God's love for all people, for every single person, is always already infinite. Not even death can separate us from that love.

Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as God's children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of God's kingdom. The moment a person is baptized, something new happens that does change a person forever. But baptism also begins the slow, incremental and holy process of burning away the useless chaff of our lives and gathering whatever is fruitful in us. This process, called "sanctification," is the gradual transformation of our actions and perspectives that comes through praying and living in community with others, and then being sent out over and over to live out our lives as Christians in the world.

When we bring people up out of the water under the name of the Trinity, God gives them new life as God's children in Christ. The Anglican tradition carried on an ancient practice that associates baptism with giving the person their name. The seed for this connection can be heard in the reading from Isaiah. The prophet was writing for Jewish exiles in Babylon, but we can hear God's life-giving gift as a divine promise for "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

In scripture, the reference to one's name implies more than just a word used to identify a person. In the first century Mediterranean, the mention of one's name was a reference to their personhood—their essence—as well as their relative standing in the community. For God to reassure us that we are called by name is to say that God has recognized our unique personhood—the essences that God created in each of us—and that we are loved and precious in God's sight.

To be baptized as a Christian is to be called by God in a specific way—to be literally plunged into Christian life. To be baptized as a Christian is to be immersed into specific, sanctifying practices of prayer, worship and study that show up as self-giving love, as acts of justice and mercy, as forgiveness and renewal.

Baptism and sanctification do not make hardships and temptations disappear. Troubles still arise, relationships still find rough seas and loved ones still die. What baptism and sanctification do is create communities of holy disciples in the midst of everyday life. Anglican theologian Fr. John Macquarrie said that baptism is "not only a turning *to* Christ; it is a turning *with* Christ or *in* Christ." Macquarrie claimed that this sharing in Christ's own baptism "is also a

kind of ordination, a call to the lay apostolate, to share in the general priesthood of the Church.<sup>1</sup>” Baptism, like the Eucharist, unites us to Christ in a mystical union that brings about a sense of Christ’s present reality.

In the film, Rosa Lee’s faith brings about a sense of Christ in her reliability as a source of comforting love to her family and friends. Despite the hard life of running a country gas station, caring for a son still grieving for his father and navigating the volatile emotions of her recovering new husband, Rosa Lee consistently notices God’s grace. “Every night,” she says to Mac, “when I thank God for all his blessings and his tender mercies to me, you and Sonny are at the top of the list.” That’s how Rosa Lee allows the essence of God’s love to come to life. How will you? How will we together?

Each one of us in our own unique way and this parish as a body can also radiate the indissoluble love of God reaching out to us and through us. By joining with Jesus in his baptism and renewing our baptismal vows, we remember that God is in the water with us, in the hardship of this world with us and in the joy of the new life still coming into fullness.

When we confess our sins in this place, we do not bring before God only our own failings. We kneel and dare to whisper our responsibility for all the ways that people disrupt relationships with God—all the things that humans do or fail to do or allow to happen that keep us or other people in fear, isolation or despair. And Jesus our brother prays with us.

When we gather to express our grief at the death of a loved one, we do not bring before God only our own emotions. We pray the pain, loneliness or relief of all those who find themselves in the turmoil of the transition from life as we now know it to resurrected life and the mystery of what lies between. And Jesus, our brother, prays with us.

When we celebrate new life, new relationships or new ministries, we do not simply bring before God our personal joy. We pray our alleluias and thanksgivings for all those who have found life-giving light in the darkness; for all those who, like Mac and Rosa Lee, have found the gift of another person to love and care for; or for all whom the church has given to God in Holy Orders. And maybe that’s when Jesus prays most fervently!

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<sup>1</sup> Macquarrie, John. *A Guide to the Sacraments*. New York, New York: Continuum, 1997.

“Nothing we do here,” writes Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, “is a private matter between us and God. Like Jesus in the river, this is something we do in union—in communion—with all humankind.<sup>2</sup>”

Anglicans don’t really have doctrine in the sense that other denominations do. What we have instead is our liturgies and it is our liturgies put our theology into action. We show, rather than tell. We *display* our “doctrine” of baptism in our baptismal liturgy. In a moment, we will answer five questions together—five questions that form the heart of our faith. Whenever we welcome a new Christian into the body of Christ, we make these promises along with them. Will any of us look different? Maybe not yet.

But then you can’t really tell baptized people by the way they look, can you? You might be able to tell by the way that they notice and convey God’s grace because baptism begins a way of life that brings out the essence of our human nature, which is to adore the God who loves us utterly. Together, we learn to trust our relationship with the Holy Trinity; to take our places at God’s table, to grow strong on God’s food and to invite others to the banquet.

And so perhaps the most tender of all mercies is that moment at each of our own baptisms, when a voice comes from heaven saying: “You, too, are my child, one of the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home by Another Way*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999.