

As a parent, one of the things I look back on with the most joy about when my children were little, was giving them a bath. They were so relaxed, comfortable, at ease, and free in the warm water, so playful, so glad I was there with them, so thankful for the clean, fresh feeling that was the final result, and so beautiful wrapped up in a towel, eager for a hug. Those were precious times!

I also remember how things change as children get older, how baths become a bother, something to avoid, that they don't think they need. It's as if they think that somehow they're impervious to dirt, that, "it doesn't stick to me, so why bother?" Or worse, "So what if it does, who cares?"

I remember enough of my own childhood to know that's how it was with me for a while. When I got to a certain age I thought I'd outgrown the need for baths. Baths were for babies, not me! I'd have all kinds of excuses. In the winter it was, "But I didn't sweat today." In the summer it was, "But I went swimming today." In fall and spring it was simply, "Do I have to?" A couple of times, just to be difficult, I ran the water but didn't get in. Unfortunately, somehow, mom could always tell.

It was only as I got older and happened to be around kids whose parents must not have been as attentive as mine, and so had been more successful than I at avoiding baths, that I came to understand how necessary they are. When you don't take them, it's not long till you begin to stink.

That's why, since the age range of Camp Bethany attendees is broad enough to include some who haven't quite come to that awareness, we make sure that the covenant we review right at the start includes the words "take a shower daily." Over the years, we've had a few who tried to ignore those words. Well, it didn't take long for them to become a presence the rest of us couldn't ignore.

All of us, if we don't wash, begin to stink. And, if lots of us don't the stink becomes unbearable.

That's true, not just in a physical, olfactory sense, but in a social, spiritual one as well.

That's why when God called John the Baptist to tell people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah the message was very clear and simple – "Clean up!"

If you clean house when company's coming, all the more reason to do it for the coming of the Lord. But more than that, if you bathe and put on clean clothes, when company's coming, surely that's what you should do if the one who's coming is God's Messiah. That's why John said, "Time to wash up! Turn your heart inside out, open it up, let your priorities and values, jealousies and resentments, fears and desires show, and let God wash it, let God dissolve all that grime, wash away the ache it's caused, so you can feel the joy of being fresh and clean again, ready for a big hug from the one who's washed you." That's what God called people to do. Still does, today, "Come and be washed!"

Sadly, we're often like kids, thinking we've outgrown the need for a good scrub. We don't see how much we've begun to stink as a result. We don't realize how much the stinking mess the world's in is because of our refusal and the refusal of so many others, to see that we're dirty and need to wash up.

That's understandable. Because what it means to be "dirty" has often been distorted.

The town where I went to college was full of evangelists, revivals, and Bible college students who visited the liberal arts schools to pitch their brand of "born again" religion. The message I got was,

“You’re riddled with sin! Everything you do is contaminated; you can do nothing about it.” The guys who badgered me seemed to be saying that when Jesus showed up, the first thing he’d do was make everybody write a hundred times: “I’m a bad person. I’m dirty. I’m a very bad, very dirty person.”

Well, you either take to such ideas or you don’t. If you don’t, if you get tired of feeling ashamed of who you are--if you know deep down that God sees more than that, that you weren’t created to be punished but loved--you tend to drop some words from your vocabulary, like “repentance” or “sin.” You say, “I’m all right; I’m a good person; I don’t need to be forgiven; those who say otherwise aren’t only wrong but cruel. You retaliate by enjoying your accomplishments, celebrating your strengths. You tell God what you’ve done right and stop thinking of what you’ve done wrong. Maybe you stop using words like “right” and “wrong” at all, substitute “human” and let it go at that.

But if you come to a church like Bethany that view will be tested, because we still use those old words - words like “sin” and “repentance,” “we are sorry,” or “forgive us.” True, we use them more gently, but we still take them seriously, they still have some bite.

You may still try to protect yourself from such words, ignoring them if you can. But even after you’ve convinced yourself that you don’t believe them anymore, they get inside your head and heart. Because they describe something real, something we can’t talk ourselves out of because it’s true!

However poorly these words have been used in the past, they still get to us because they call to a part of us that wants to respond but doesn’t know how--the part that knows we’re not all good any more than we’re all bad—the part that knows that though we’re soiled and need to be washed, we’re not rotten and ready to be thrown away—that doesn’t know who we are but wants to know, and suspects that God knows, and wants to be kept, washed, and made clean by the only one who can do that.

When John called people to “repent,” all he meant, all the word has ever meant, is to turn toward the God who has the water running. Turn around, stop avoiding the one who knows you’re dirty, because he’s not out to punish you. He simply loves you too much to let you stay dirty (and stinky); he loves you enough to want you to know the joy of being clean and fresh and embraced with a hug.

Repentance begins with simply admitting that you’ve become soiled, gotten dirty, and maybe even begun to stink and (and this “and” is crucial) despite all you’ve done to deny it, you need a bath. That admission, that act of honest humility, makes all the difference.

It opens us to a fresh start. So, repentance is not remorse but an end to remorse, celebrated with a long, hot bath. When John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, that’s what he had in mind--not staying after school to fill the blackboard with apologies but being washed clean and knowing who to thank. In other words, it’s not an indictment, it’s a gift--a gift God wants to give anyone with the sense to say “thank you” instead of “no” or “not yet,” or “do I have to?”

Like a loving parent, God sees us as a soiled, maybe even stinky child, still beautiful beneath all the grime. So, God draws a bath for us, eager to share the tenderness of a cleansing wash.

Yet, too often, we can’t admit that we need it, much less that we stink. We can’t imagine how good it would feel to be washed, made totally clean - tenderly, with mercy and grace - by the only one who can do it. We not only fail to recognize that we’re dirty, but that “self-cleaning” is impossible for us.

So, we tiptoe around, sniff suspiciously at the rising steam, think of all the reasons why it's too hot, too cold, too deep, too shallow, too easy, too hard, too soon, too late, for us to get in right now.

Maybe we're afraid that being soiled and dirty makes us worthless, so we refuse to admit that we are. But, really, being soiled and dirty makes us no more worthless than the white shirt I dribbled coffee on last week. There's nothing wrong with it that a good washing can't fix.

For sure, we doubt God's love. We can't image anyone loving someone who's gotten so soiled and stinky. So we try to deny the soil and the stink that our fears and desires, greed and selfishness, jealousy and hatred have caused. But whole reason to repent is that God loves us in spite of all that.

These doubts and fears not only get in the way of our personal repentance, but of our helping our children recognize their need for repentance, too. Sadly, as parents, we're often like kids with our kids, not wanting to see, not wanting them to see, that they need a good scrub, getting defensive when it's suggested that they do. Yet, children and youth do need to repent. Need to see that they get soiled, dirty, sometimes even quite stinky, and need a good wash, and there's no shame in that.

But often, when someone tries to help our child see what's gotten soiled in their language, attitude, honesty, or personal habits, or tries to help us see it, our first response is defensiveness, even anger. Yet, that's just what our baptismal promises call us to do. Those promises call us to a love that goes way beyond affirmation, to a tough yet tender honesty about how soiled our children may become. Those promises call us to be honest with one another about that, and as parents to not only accept that honesty but expect it from our faith family, and be grateful for it, not defensive or resentful. All because we trust that each of us see our children for who they really are – children... OF GOD! They may get soiled, dirty, or even stinky, but they never become worthless. They're always washable, washable in God's redeeming love. And the most loving thing we can do when they get dirty is to speak the truth, say the "no," set the boundary, that help them get to God's bath.

Repentance is not something to be afraid or ashamed of. It's a gift! A wonderful gift we need to receive regularly! It's not a one time thing, a big, never-to-be-repeated splash that empties the pool of water. It's not even a two or three time thing. It is more like a daily thing, or at least a weekly thing, something God's people do every time we gather to worship our Lord.

Confessing our sins against God and our neighbor, we step into the tub, and then, God bathes us. Having seen us as we are and not turned away—having reached out to pick us up and put us in the water, God washes us and rinses us and wraps us in mercy--not for the first time, nor the last, but again, because we need regular baths and there's no shame in that. We're not here because we're clean but because we're washable, washable but not self-cleaning. We're here because we need and want to be bathed like a child, a child of God, child of a God who is full of love and mercy. We're here because we want the joy that only such a bath, given by such a God, can bring. Amen.

Dear God,

We hear the words of John the Baptist and we find them challenging and abrasive.
We don't like to be told that there's so much wrong with us and that we need to change.
We don't like to be told that we've gotten dirty, perhaps have even begun to stink,
...and that we need to be washed, to repent, and be made clean.

Help us not to dismiss John's challenge, help us not to deny the truth we need to hear about ourselves
But help us remember who it is who says, we're dirty and need to wash,
...and who it is that wants to wash us – YOU!

You see all these things about us, all this grime that soils us, all the stuff that makes us stink,
...and you don't want to shame us or punish us for it.

You know what's underneath, who you created us to be, your beloved child.

You love us!

All you want to do is what only you can do - wash the dirt away, make us clean and fresh again.
All you want us to do is to turn toward you, come to you, let you, let you wash us and make us clean.

So, we ask you to strengthen our trust in your love, that you deepen our humility,
...so we can let you do that.

Help us not to be ashamed of our need to be washed.

Help us welcome the washing, because you are doing it, because you love us,
...because it brings us closer to you.

We ask that you grant us that same trust in your love as parents,
...and that same recognition that it is not a shame to need to be washed in dealing with our children.
Help us be willing to see and hear where they've gotten dirty and need a scrub,
...and not to be angry with those who want to help us see and hear, but to trust that like you,
...they are motivated out of love, they see the goodness that is underneath,
...and want to restore that freshness and beauty.

On this day of Baptism we ask that you help us remember the promises of this sacrament –
...your promise of unconditional love, our promise to help our children know that love.
Help us develop the disciplines we need to keep our promises – sharing our faith with them at home,
...doing all we can to help them become part of their faith family,
...so all of us have a chance to keep our promises, too,
...bringing our children to worship and to Sunday school,
...encouraging them to join in the fellowship and service,
...giving them opportunities to know and love their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In this season of considering our reasons for gratitude
...and responding with an expression of our hopes for giving
...in support of the ministry and mission done by our faith family for you, be with each one of us.
Help all of us to see our blessings and that we have something to give – time, talent AND treasure
...to share in giving you honor and glory.

As those who seek to live as a true faith family and to care for one another as sisters and brothers,
...we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We pray for...