

I enjoy trying to come up with titles to my sermons and meditations — the meditations being nothing but shorter sermons offered when we are celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper or celebrating or, as today, revisiting, the Sacrament of Baptism. Sometimes I pat myself on the back for what seems cleverness to me, but I am mainly trying to pique your interest — or that of someone who might see in advance my title, such as by seeing the board outside the church in Florence.

This week, our Florence secretary, Nancy Rodrigues, whom I am going to miss very much when she retires at the end of the month, had received the Order of Worship from me via email and put it on that board, such that I saw it as I arrived following the Men's Breakfast on Wednesday. Nancy had assumed, I guess, that I had misspelled a word. The title in your bulletin is correct:

For *Prophet* Baptism

but she had put on the board,

For *Profit* Baptism

and thought I would get a lot of response from that title.

My original intention had been that in our Hebrew Bible reading from the second of the *prophet* — with a *phet* — Isaiah's, the first of that writer's so-called "Servant Songs," we get a picture of what God wants of us in both the Servant and the Prophet who speaks of him. It's still part of what I want to say — and just did, — but Nancy's original sign leads me to consider both of those *pro*- words, because, especially since the latter part of our service will include revisiting the vows we made, or more than likely, were made on our behalves, at our own baptisms, it is worth considering that my title could or should be

Baptism: for Profit and Prophet.

Especially for those of you raised Roman Catholic pre Pope Benedict XVI's renouncing *limbo*, a child's being baptized asap was relevant for fear of what might happen were that child to die before being baptized. And — and I'll not embarrass anyone, — there

may be those of you who worry about grandchildren or great-grandchildren who have not been baptized and are yourselves worried in that same way.

In other words, isn't Baptism necessary for salvation? To make certain one "goes to heaven"?

And the answer is: "No." John the Baptizer baptized for *repentance* of sins, for forgiveness of sins, which, if Jesus was without sin, ultimately caused the writers of the gospels to question whether or why Jesus would actually have been baptized by John. But though Jesus' baptism could not have been to forgive sins, is it not in being baptized that *our* sins are forgiven? Again, "No." Our sins are forgiven, we are promised eternal life, not through Baptism, but *through faith in Christ*. Faith in Christ is what saves us, as the apostle Paul, and Jesus himself in that passage familiar to all who watch football on TV, John 3:16, tell us. *Nothing we humans do can add to — such as by Baptism — or take away from what Jesus has done for us.*

This is especially worth noting in this year when the world — or at least the Protestant world — observes and, I hope, celebrates the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's act that is credited with beginning the Protestant Reformation.

And at the heart of Luther's theological "discovery" — which he found in what the apostle Paul, writing in Galatians and Romans, had known almost 1500 years earlier — at the heart of Luther's theological "discovery" that led him to protest was the realization that *no* human, even a Pope, or a church, could add to or take away from that which God through Christ had *given*. I choose the word *given* rather than *done* because at the heart of the Reformation and of Protestantism is the idea of *grace*; what God has done for us through Jesus is an act of *grace*, a *gift* given, not a reward earned whether through good behavior or from participating in a ritual.

God has provided us with salvation through the gift of Jesus Christ's life and death and resurrection.

Then why do we baptize? Well, first and foremost, Baptism is a way of our declaring that faith in Christ, as we shall again experience, but infants and at least small children cannot be expected to comprehend faith in Christ, which is why when we practice their Baptism, the parents and the congregation vow to help raise the child so that the child might grow into such faith. But it is not their Baptism that provides salvation to them, but Jesus. Baptism also has the larger meaning of joining the capital “C” Church of Jesus Christ, the “communion of saints,” which — something we see when we do infant baptism, which I dearly love to administer — also involves our being embraced by that Church. We *profit*, the “fit” profit, by understanding that we are accepted by others as a fellow follower of Jesus Christ; we receive — should receive — love as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, even if that love might not be quite so unconditional, coming from human beings, as is God’s love for us shown in Christ. If we sense that acceptance, that brotherly love, it should *profit* us in an intangible yet meaningful way.

But we are also, in my sometimes not-all-that-humble opinion, baptized for — really, *as, prophet*, the “phet” kind of a prophet, and whether we as individuals claim that mantle, though I believe we should, our Baptism grafts us onto that earthly body of Christ, His Church, for which *prophet* describes a central part of its — our — mission.

But this is where the word, *prophet* with a “phet,” is too easily misunderstood. In the Christian and Jewish sense, and I assume it is the same in Islam, a *prophet* is not a fortune-teller, but rather *one who speaks on behalf of God*. For the more youthful members of my time in seminary, they loved to think of what is termed, “speaking prophetically” in the virtuous sense of “speaking truth to power,” though in actual terms often simply telling others how corrupt those others were . . . but implicitly displaying their own self-righteousness. And there is a sensitive consideration here, one I perhaps too readily avoid: Sometimes, *speaking on behalf of God, speaking as a prophet*, requires delivering some bad news, some criticism, even condemnation of certain behavior, such as adultery, to give an example.

But if all we do, even if a major part of what we do, is to speak against, we are not adequate in our individual or church roles as *prophet*; we must, I believe, speak of and show the love of God that we are able to see in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! We must display how it is our awareness of God's grace, of God's unconditional love, not our merit, that makes us observant Christians.

Ah, and knowing that love that leads a Christian to be a *prophet* returns a great *profit* in knowing that one is living true to the vows — for which most of us were ignorant when first they were made on our behalves — the vows made for us at our own Baptisms, our Baptism as *prophets*. Vows which later we shall renew.

And in our keeping those vows as *prophets*, may Christ's Church *profit* from us.