

THIS IS THE WATER OF BAPTISM

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9)

Over the next few weeks countless schools will be holding commencement exercises. In this city alone NYU, the New School, Columbia, Cooper Union, and Fordham all graduate this week. At most of these ceremonies an invited speaker will deliver an address. For example, later this month when Grace Church School graduates its first class of 12th graders since the 1940s, *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks will be the speaker. The commencement address has become something of its own genre. You can go online and read them. You can even call up various rankings of the top-ten commencement addresses of all time.

One commencement address that seems to make every top-ten list was delivered by David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in May of 2005. The address has come to be entitled, *This is Water*. It really is worthy of reading if you have the time. Wallace began with a funny little story. *There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the {heck} is water?"* Wallace went on to explain that "the point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."

When I first read today's passage from the Gospel of John, I recalled David Foster Wallace's fish story. We've heard John describing a moment of the Last Supper – the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died. Jesus had been going on at some length with what Biblical scholars have come to entitle "the Farewell Address." His words were indeed somewhat in the genre of a commencement address. Something was ending, but even more, something else was to begin. To commence is to begin. Jesus was explaining that soon he would be departing. The three-year school of discipleship would be over, and the responsibility for the Christian movement would belong to the likes of Peter, James, John, and Philip. Their leadership was to begin, to commence. But when *Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied,"* Jesus replied to Philip as if the disciple were a fish who had just asked, "What the heck is water?" *Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

The point that Jesus would make was that for the past three years, God the Father should have been the most obvious reality of Philip's life. Jesus might well have quoted some verses of today's Psalm 104: *O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all, the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living creatures too many to number, creatures both small and great.* What is more, Jesus implied that the Spirit of God empowering and animating the whole creation was uniquely in himself, reconciling the world to God. The works that Jesus did were evidence of the Spirit of God: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, making the lame to walk, raising the dead, forgiving sins. "How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" Think about it, Philip. If you've seen me, and the works I've done, you've seen the Father. You've seen the Spirit of God.

It didn't end there. Jesus went on to promise Philip and the other disciples that the Spirit of God dwelling richly in him would soon be a gift for them. And so it was. As we heard in today's reading from the Book of Acts (2:1-21), it was fifty days after Easter, the Day of Pentecost, the day we celebrate today. The disciples were gathered in one place when the Spirit of God filled them with such power that they could only describe the experience as the rush of a mighty wind, and tongues of fire above their heads. The same Spirit of God – the Advocate, the Comforter – that Jesus shared with the Father was now theirs too. By the power of the Spirit, these ordinary people would go forth to do just what Jesus said they would do: the very works that he did, and in some instances, even greater works.

What we celebrate today is the gift of the Holy Spirit: God's gift to the church in every generation, not just to a handful of disciples two-thousand years ago. You and I can be filled with the Spirit of God, as were the disciples, as was Jesus. You and I can enjoy such close companionship with God that it will be as if anything we ask in the name of Jesus will be granted. Really? Anything? I've prayed for many things over the years that haven't come to be. As far as I know, I've never raised the dead, or given sight to the blind, or caused anyone to take up his pallet and walk. Why is the presence of God not as obvious to Philip and to me and possibly to you as water is to a fish? Well, we should not lose heart if we seem to be in the dark. We are in good company. Remember that in those first confusing days of Easter, Mary Magdalene and Philip and all the disciples had trouble recognizing the risen Jesus. Even though they'd been with Jesus for at least three years, they mistook him for a gardener, another traveler, another fisherman. It was only in the familiar action of Jesus' taking the bread, blessing it, breaking it, and passing the cup that their eyes were opened. This is bread. This is wine. This is my body. This is my blood. Such moments are sacramental because God is reaching out to us. The veil is lifted, and God makes himself known. The shroud that covers our eyes is removed – perhaps ever so briefly – and we can see, or feel, or otherwise know the presence of God.

What do we believe is truly happening in these sacramental moments? Are we conjuring up the presence of God where God wasn't present before? Or are we opening our eyes to God's presence which pervades all creation, all the time? I like to think that participating in the sacraments is like drawing back the curtains from the windows to our inmost selves so that the light and life of God can flood the dark rooms of our souls. God, who is always present, fills us with his Spirit through the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and today, through the water of baptism. We've given thanks today for the gift of water. This is water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it God led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. In Jesus received the baptism of John to lead us through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin to everlasting life. This is the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection.

Today, sixteen people of all ages have received the gift of the Spirit in the water of Baptism. These sixteen now have something in common with the famous author, Edith Wharton. On Easter Day, April 20, 1862 Edith Wharton was baptized right here. She would go on to write *The Age of Innocence*, a novel about high society life in the gilded age of New York City. She had some things to say about Grace Church: *For in a world where all else had reeled on its foundation, the Grace Church wedding remained an unchanged institution.* These were the days when you would make no social mistake to belong to Grace Church. You aspired to a Grace Church wedding. And as it was with weddings so it must have been with baptisms. My guess is that young Edith's baptism was a proper and precious affair. Even though it was Easter, I'm sure it was privately done at the font, in hushed tones, after everyone else had left.

If Edith Wharton were to see the Grace Church baptism today, she would probably declare that the world had reeled on its foundation. Sixteen baptisms at once is hardly what I'd call a gathering of polite company. What happened? Well, first the Book of Common Prayer proved itself to be a changing institution, and the latest version clearly states that baptism should be

performed not in private, but within the Eucharist as the chief service on a Sunday. Then came our new organ that makes it difficult to gather large crowds around our font, and obscures certain views. What is more, I noted that on baptism Sundays all the candidate families sat over in the north transept near the font, and a goodly number of them sneaked away before the water was even dry on their child's forehead! I mean, how rude is that? So we decided to move the baptism ceremony into the center of things.

But what is that in which the baptisms have taken place? That isn't a baptismal font. That is an ice bucket. That is a punch bowl. No one aspires to be baptized in a punch bowl! What's going on here? It gets even better. That isn't just any punch bowl. That is the all-purpose Grace Church punch bowl or ice bucket or baptismal font, depending on the function. Therein lies a parable. You see, it's not the container that conveys the Spirit, it's the water. In the water of baptism we are joined to the Body of Christ in a bond that is indissoluble. We are baptized into the life of Christ.

What does the life of Christ involve? It involves humble service. On the night before he died Jesus not only broke the bread and passed the cup, he also poured water into a basin. In that basin he washed the disgusting feet of his disciples, setting an example for them of what it means to be great in the kingdom of God. If you come to Grace Church on Maundy Thursday (and now that you're baptized, I haven't any doubt that every single one of you will be here), you will see that the liturgy that evening, the day before Good Friday, includes washing the feet of anyone who comes forward, even anyone right off the street. You'll also see that the basin we use for foot washing is that very ice bucket we use today for baptism. We didn't plan it that way, it just started happening. Baptism commences a life of humble service.

The life of Christ also involves prayer and discernment. Jesus often withdrew for intensive times of prayer. So do we. As you know, we're looking for our next Associate Rector due to Stephen Holton's impending move to Christ Church, New Haven. On Thursday evening the advisory committee and I met with a candidate for prayer and discernment, all of us seeking the will of God. Is this the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another? As we me and contemplated in this manner, on a nearby table was our ice bucket – that ice bucket – keeping cool bottles of water and diet coke, helping us to pray and discern. Baptism commences a life of prayer and discernment.

The life of Christ also involves joy and celebration. Jesus attended the wedding in Cana of Galilee, and there turned water into wine, for apparently no other reason than to save the party. At our many parish parties and picnics you'll see our ice bucket again – that very ice bucket – filled with bottles of wine and champagne (and non-alcoholic beverages too), helping us to make the connection between baptism and the Spirit's gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. By the way, just in case you were wondering, between its various and sundry uses we do wash our ice bucket!

Today, when you come forward for Communion, you can take the Grace Church version of the ice bucket challenge. Please don't pour the whole thing on your head! But do touch the water. Put your hand all the way in, touch your forehead with the water, and make the sign of the cross. Then dare to believe that the Spirit of God abides with you and is in you and impels you into the world to do God's deeds of power.

This is water. This is the water of Baptism. This is the Day of Pentecost. This is the day that the Holy Spirit is God's gift to you. Life in Christ commences today.

Jesus said, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*