Proper 13 B: Baptism of Johanna Jade Van Guilder

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Susan L. Davidson

All Saints’, Wolcott

*“…to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”*

 Several months ago, when we scheduled Johanna’s Baptism, none of us had any idea that the day would present us with such perfect lectionary readings for the occasion – to say nothing of the celebration of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! The lessons appointed for today direct our hearts and minds to the foundations of the Christian life, and especially – in the Epistle and Gospel - to the two fundamental Sacraments given to us personally by Christ – Baptism and Eucharist.

 Not to be ignored is the powerful message of repentance and forgiveness in the Old Testament lesson and its accompanying psalm. We have been following for a couple of months now the story of the early development of the Kingdom of God through the kings raised up in ancient Israel: first, Saul, followed by the iconic David, the king, who did many wonderful things during his reign, including uniting the North and South kingdoms and bringing peace to the land. Alas, David had his own failings, and we heard last Sunday how his lust for the beautiful Bathsheba and for the power to possess her led him to send her husband to certain death in the front lines of battle. Today, we heard how David was brought to account for that action by the prophet Nathan, and how his awareness of his sin led to his confession and repentance in Psalm 51. “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” he prayed, and it was done. This story marks for us one of the greatest examples of penitence and forgiveness in the Bible. It is a reminder to us that all human beings are susceptible to sin, just as King David was; and those of us who know the story of Jesus’ earthly life, some one thousand years later, know that through his own death and resurrection the forgiveness of sins is granted to all. So when, in the Baptismal liturgy, we are asked, “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever (not *if* ever, but *when*ever) you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” our answer can be a resounding “I will, with God’s help,” because we realize that it is only by the Grace of God that we are delivered from our sins.

 Then we hear from the letter of the Apostle Paul to his beloved Ephesians about the importance of living the Baptismal life and following Jesus; the importance of exercising, as did our Savior, “humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” That is no easy task in these days of so much division and derision! But we can do it, by the Grace of God, if we try, because Christ in us strengthens us to that purpose. Paul speaks eloquently about the gifts given to us by Christ, through the Spirit, in Baptism – gifts which equip us for ministry, to build up the body of Christ that is the Church. Some, Paul says, are to be “apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

 And because none of us is able to do any of that without God’s help, we come to church every Sunday to be filled with “the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” in the words of Jesus, as quoted by the Evangelist John. There is spiritual strength for endurance, resilience, courage, and hope for the ages in this food. Last week, we began to examine this one chapter in the Gospel of John with great care, so that we might learn the riches of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus. Every summer, no matter what Gospel account we spend the rest of the year studying, we spend five weeks on this one chapter, to be reminded, in the wilderness of our daily lives so burdened with the daily news of poverty, oppression and injustice; with war and violence, abroad and in our streets; with terrorism, racism, sexism, and all kinds of “isms;” with disease, death, and disasters of the natural world; with loneliness, homelessness, unemployment, and fear – in the midst of all these, we come to be renewed – to be strengthened and comforted by our companions in community; to be fed by and with Jesus Christ the bread of life, who nourishes our bodies and souls with love and hope, and with the the cup of salvation - the blood of Christ by which we are forgiven.

 Johanna, today you will enter this life of love and hope and forgiveness and ministry by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and be born again for the second time in almost two years, into a family that’s bigger than you can imagine! Because of his military deployment, your dad is not able to be here today – and we all miss him, of course – but your heavenly Father is here and at work for good in you, in the Church, and in the world. In the Gospel passage we heard today, Jesus encourages his followers, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that the Father has set his seal.” In a few minutes you will die to sin and rise to new and eternal life in the waters of the Font. *You* will be sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, as Jesus himself was sealed by that Spirit at his own Baptism, and you will be marked as Christ’s own forever. You will receive, for the first time, “the food that endures for eternal life,” the body and blood of Christ, the bread of life, and the cup of salvation. Johanna, as you grow up, you may not remember a lot about this service today, but your parents and Godparents and grandparents and your older sister Katelynn will tell you about it over and over again, every year, on the anniversary of your new birth in Christ, so that eventually you may come to know and trust that there is no one whom God loves more than you – that God is with you and in you wherever you go, and that Christ will strengthen you to do whatever he calls you to do to help him make visible to all other people the boundless, awesome love of God. I learned yesterday how much you love to hug! I promise you that Jesus will hold you fast in his embrace in this life and the next, “so that,” as Paul says, “you may come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”