

1 Joel

Greetings

Gerald, a pastor of Christ by the will of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope.
To Joel, my true colleague and partner in the faith, and to the brothers and sisters with him at North Park Community Church.
Grace, mercy, and peace. And above all, the love of Jesus.

The Kingdom of Christ

As I urged you when you were leaving for your first pastorate, do not forget the fullness of Christ's baptismal virtues. The landscape shifts every day; the old foundations are being shaken. As it is written,

“You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open.”

And again,

“When the foundations are shaken, what can the righteous do?”

And yet we are not shaken. For the Lord, who shakes the heavens by the word of his power, has given us a share in his “kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

“The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.”

We live in perilous times. The political landscape of the west is fracturing. If we—as the church's shepherds—are not careful, the church will bifurcate along the political fault lines. What will hold us together amidst the fracturing of the world's kingdoms? Our baptism.

The Twin Virtues of Baptism

Amidst the cultural upheaval of the world, I exhort you, by the grace of our Lord Jesus, to remember your baptism. It tells you of the twin virtues of your life in Christ, and it will guide you as you shepherd your congregation.

To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into his death. Baptism is an acknowledgement that we have been damaged by sin and that we have been born into a damaged and broken world. To be baptized is to surrender our whole selves to God, and to acknowledge that we must die to our old way of life, to the world and its vain ambitions.

But baptism is more than dying with Christ. It is also rising with Christ. Baptism is a statement about our hope in the healing power of God and the glory of the world to come. To be baptized is to express our faith that God's resurrection power is able to fix what has been broken. It is a statement that the “broken world that is,” will become the “all things new world” of the future.

In this way, the message of baptism is always two-fold—that we must die with Christ to our old life of sin and ruin; and that we must rise with Christ to the newness of the life to come. These two baptismal movements are recapitulated throughout the Christian's entire life.

Every time we acknowledge God’s power and our weakness, every time we acknowledge that God is the king and we are his subjects, every time we acknowledge that God is the master and we are his servants, every time we choose the hard path of suffering over the path of comfort, every time we humbly submit ourselves to God’s law, every time we yield to the truth and say “Not my will, but your will be done”—we are living into our baptismal death with Christ.

And yet, to die is to live.

Every time we triumph over difficulties through faith, every time we experience the Holy Spirit’s victorious power over sin, every time we see miraculous healing, every time we see someone respond to the life giving hope of the gospel, every time we experience liberation and freedom and new life, every time we say, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”—we are living into our baptismal resurrection with Christ.

These two movements set into motion two sets of baptismal virtues: the “dying with Christ” virtues, and the “rising with Christ” virtues. Consider each set of baptismal virtues.

DYING WITH CHRIST

Truth
Rules
Justice
Sacrifice
Endurance
Self-Denial
Individual Responsibility
Accountability
Tough Love

RISING WITH CHRIST

Grace
Freedom
Social Justice
Empowerment
Healing
Compassion
Community Assistance
Mercy
Tender Love

Holding Together Both Baptismal Virtues

Do not be only half baptized. The “dying with Christ” virtues, by themselves, will make you a pharisee. What good is truth if it doesn’t lead to kindness? What good are rules if they don’t create a context for flourishing? What good is justice if it doesn’t create a fair society? What good is denying oneself if it doesn’t lead to joy? What good is a doctrinally sound church if it doesn’t foster a loving community? The “dying with Christ” impulses, when not in service of the “rising with Christ” impulses, are like a foundation with no house. Or perhaps worse, like putting the foundation on top of the house, crushing all within.

But so too, the “rising with Christ” virtues, by themselves, will make you a libertine. Kindness that isn’t grounded in truth is mere sentimentality; freedom that is not based on rules is anarchy; joy that isn’t founded on self-restraint is indulgence; community assistance that isn’t based on individual responsibility is enablement; compassion without accountability is permissiveness. The “rising with Christ” virtues, when not built upon the foundation of the “dying with Christ” virtues are like a house built upon the sand that topples upon itself and destroys those living within.

In both cases, the twin virtues of baptism, when isolated from each other, become totalizing and destructive. Christ holds all things together. Beloved of Christ, so too must you hold all things together in him. If you are strong on truth, be mindful of kindness. If you rejoice

in freedom, do not neglect the need for rules. If justice comes easily, do not forget mercy. If you are graced with a capacity for endurance, do not neglect the call of our Lord to bear another's burden. The church must embrace and live out both baptismal truths.

Baptismal Virtues and Politics

But alas. What God has joined together, our culture has separated. Our political landscape has fractured into conservative and liberal parties.

The conservative political mind quickly recognizes the dangers and brokenness of the world. It insists that we must come to terms with the world *as it is*—in all of its shortcomings and hostility. It strategically retreats, and focuses on foundational realities—on security, power, and order.

The liberal political mind quickly recognizes the goodness and potential of the world. It insists that we must imagine and work toward the world *as it should be*—in all its beauty and promise. It strategically advances, and focuses on utopian ideals—on fairness, equality, and unity.

Consider the virtues championed by our conservative and liberal parties.

CONSERVATIVE VALUES

Truth
Rules
Justice
Sacrifice
Endurance
Self-Denial
Individual Responsibility
Accountability
Tough Love

LIBERAL VALUES

Grace
Freedom
Social Justice
Empowerment
Healing
Compassion
Community Assistance
Mercy
Tender Love

Do you not see that our political polarization is simply the baptismal virtues in isolation? Political conservatives focus on the “dying with Christ” virtues. Political liberals focus on the “rising with Christ” virtues. Of course, neither side thinks of their virtues as belonging to Christ. And because they do not, they fail to embrace both sets. Left in isolation from each other, each set of virtues becomes destructive and totalizing.

Political Exhortations

First, remind your congregation that the political kingdoms of this world are inherently inadequate and sub-Christian, insofar as they prioritize only one set of the baptismal virtues. We must not embrace an earthly political kingdom in such a way that we become co-opted by its baptismal isolationism. The danger lurks in both directions. Beware the ditches on either side of the road.

Second, remind your congregants to be gracious to each other within the larger household of God. Our political structure forces us to choose a political side. But a single vote—cast in either direction—will always be a compromise of our baptismal identity. Politics are fraught and confusing. Let us grant each other the freedom to choose which set of baptismal virtues is most needed in a given cultural moment. Will the problems of our political kingdom be helped by more “dying with Christ” virtues? Or does the situation call for more “rising with Christ”

virtues? You may think our baptismal virtues call us to the left. I may think our baptismal virtues call us to the right. Let us both grant that both of us are doing our best to enact our shared baptismal virtues. If we disagree, let us both agree that we are both striving to pursue the truth of our baptismal identity.

And finally, always remember that only the Church is—and can be—the kingdom of God, because only the Church can hold together the fullness of the truth of baptism. Sin fractures reality; grace reunites it. Our Lord has distributed his grace uniquely to each part of the body. Some parts of the body are good at “dying with Christ.” Other parts are good at “rising with Christ.” You teach me how to rise with Christ, and I will teach you how to die with Christ. And together we will learn to die and rise with Christ, and so grow up into him who is the Head.

Final Greetings

I appeal to you brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation. Maintain the Spirit of unity in the bond of peace. And may your peace—which is Christ’s peace—witness to the unifying grace of Jesus. May his kingdom come.