

Memorize & Ponder

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
October 27, 2013
Baptism of Ayla Marie Wells**

Positive Christianity

**Galatians 5:22-26 & Ps 65
(654, 521, 471, 656)**

Ayla Marie Wells has been baptized this morning.

Another beloved child of God
has been visibly and joyfully welcomed into the church,
into the Body of Christ that continues his witness in the world.

If this act of God's redeeming grace
is to have its full impact,
to reach its full potential in Ayla,
we all have to take the vows we made seriously.
And that means paying attention
to the kind of Christianity we model for Ayla
and every other beloved child of God
we influence in our lives.

There is perhaps no greater blessing to be offered
than to raise a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,
as the traditional language of the church puts it.

That means, quite simply,
being for them the gifts or fruits of the Spirit
listed in Paul's letter to the Galatians
from which we read this morning.
Ponder them afresh as I repeat them:

*... love, joy peace,
patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

You don't cultivate these qualities of being
by obeying and conforming to rules and laws.

You don't earn these gifts
by obedience and submission.
You accept these qualities of being
as loving gifts from a gracious God
who came in Jesus Christ,

in our flesh and full of grace and truth,
to re-establish the original relationship of mutual blessing.

That initiative from God,
undeserved on our part yet unconditional on God's,
is the foundation for what I call positive Christianity.

That's the kind of Christianity
that will nurture and nourish Ayla best.
Let me try and highlight three features
of this way of understanding the Christian faith
that you have agreed this morning
to model for Ayla.

First, a positive Christianity focuses on potential, not problems.
Second, a positive Christianity flows best from love, not fear.
Third, a positive Christianity flourishes best in community.

We live in a problem-obsessed society.
Our first impulse, in most cases, is to ask "What's wrong?"
Only then can we seem to figure out how to help.
Whether it's in the fields of medicine, serving and protecting, or defense,
all major emphases in our fearful society these days,
the focus is on the problems and their solutions,
what's going wrong and how to we correct it.

A positive Christianity sees things differently.

It believes deeply and firmly that we live in a potential-laden society.

Opportunities to flourish are abundant.
Indeed, the possibility of flourishing abundantly
is the very nature of reality,
the very will of God.
God created and equipped us to live full and joyful lives.
There are lots of things that interfere with that potential –
things within us, among us, and around us –
but they do not define reality.
God's desire for and delight in
steadfast love, justice, and righteousness (Jer 9:24b)
is what defines reality for a positive Christianity.

Instead of constantly asking, "What's wrong that has to be solved?"
this different way of seeing things
invites you to ask "What's possible so we can flourish?"

To help Ayla blossom into her full potential as a beloved child of God –
that's what we pledged ourselves to do this morning.

Second, we live in fearful times.
Especially since 9/11, fear has gripped and constricted
almost every dimension of our lives.
Our world is usually portrayed as violent, hateful, heartless, and corrupt.
It's on TV, in the newspapers, in our video games, in the movies.
Fear is fascinating and very profitable.
As Halloween approaches, we'll be inundated
with 'fright night festivals.'

A positive Christianity sees things differently.

While acknowledging the reality of fear,
it does not submit to it by letting it define reality.
Rather, it holds firm to the conviction
that there is a force stronger than fear,
a power that casts our fear –
the love of God freely available to us
in our relationship with Jesus, the Christ.
It's not a power that you need to earn.
It's a gift that currently resides deep within you.
You just have to consent to live out of its strength.
It won't eliminate the fear.
But it will give you a different way of seeing and responding to the fear –
one filled with the courage of divine love.
Fear shuts you down and depresses you.
Divine love opens you up and nourishes you to flourish.
And when you flourish, those around you do as well.

Third, lonely and solitary people,
often driven into isolation by anxiety or anger,
shrivel and spoil.
Their potential withers and dies.
Fear takes over their lives.
They lose sight of God's love,
that is always with them,
and the love of others that is always possible.
Too often, they cannot forgive themselves
and cut themselves off from sources of flourishing.
Too often, we won't forgive them
and cut them off from sources of flourishing.

A positive Christianity sees things differently.

It invites people to live in community,
in companionship with God and others.

In that kind of community, they will get and stay in touch
with the self that God created them to be –
filled with the gifts of the Spirit,
connected to others who will benefit from those gifts,
and embraced by God's steadfast love
that energizes the use of those gifts to bless the world.

That's what it means to be free in Jesus Christ.

That's the freedom to flourish that Ayla enjoys.

And we have vowed this morning
to make that positive Christianity the dominant influence in her life,
and in the life of her family,
and in the lives of all who their lives touch.

This is serious stuff.
The fate of our society depends on the ability of some,
hopefully many,
to see things differently –
to focus on potential rather than problems,
to cast our fear with love,
and to form communities that enable people to flourish together.

That's what a positive Christianity is all about.

*May God fill us with LAFter this week,
with love, aspiration, and faith,
as we go forth to bless the world.*

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