

“Swimming Lessons for Christians”

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Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

When I was 5 years old, my dad took me to the YMCA to start swimming lessons. I went with fear and trembling, because I had just heard my big sister tell me that when she was at the pool, a boy from her grade pushed her into the deep end.

“Did you drown?” I asked her, my eyes wide with concern.

“Of course not, silly,” my sister told me, “If I had drowned, then I would be dead, and here I am sitting next to you!”

Well, that opened up a new fear about pools: not only did they have deep ends, but also if you drowned in them, then you could die.

I remember those first minutes sitting at the edge of the YMCA pool: the small beige tiles that made up the walls of the pool and the blue water lapping at its edges. I remember the echoes bouncing off the high, metal ceilings: children’s happy voices, lifeguard whistles, and the *kerplunk!* of people jumping off the diving board and the terrifying high dive. Among the noises emerged my new swimming instructor’s voice, gently trying to coax me into the water.

I stuck to that wall like bubble gum to the bottom of a shoe-- even when my instructor physically carried my body into the water, my arms still clung to the edge until they could stretch and reach no further, and I was fully in the water. Of course, at that point I clung to my swim instructor, this time like a barnacle sticks to the side of a boat. I did not know her, and I cannot picture her face today, but in that moment she held the power of life and death, and I trusted her with my entire being.

I have no idea what else happened in that lesson, though I am sure guessing from watching my own daughter’s lessons it involved sticking my face in the water and blowing bubbles, kicking my feet, and finally the full, underwater dunk.

What I do remember is getting out of the pool and having a nearly out-of-body experience-- not because I was so relieved to be done with a terrifying lesson, but because even though I expected terror, I had in fact experienced joy. There was something about being surrounded by water, and held by it, and surrendering myself into its trust, that exhilarated me.

And, as it turns out, swimming became a lifelong joy for me. Soon I was swimming long distances in the lake and riding waves in the ocean. In college I made money by lifeguarding at the school's pool and at summer camp. Because I can swim, I have learned how to surf and scuba-dive. When I was in my last term of pregnancy and my the pressures of being stretched and swollen were just too much for my body, I could get in a pool and feel instantly weightless. Now I delight in having my own daughter swim alongside me.

I know swimming isn't for everyone. It can be expensive to find a place to swim and someone to teach you. For people whose hair has a mind of its own, it's hard to control what your hair will choose to do after spending time in the pool. Some weren't given the swimming lessons I got as a 5-year old, and it's one thing for a young child to be clinging to the walls of the pool in terror, but as an adult who has choices that just might feel like too much.

But I maintain that learning to swim is truly worth it, and my hope is that no matter what your age, you will consider learning if you have not done so already.

I also believe living a Christian life is truly worth it, and my hope is that no matter what your age, you will consider following Jesus if you have not tried to do so already.

My little brother learned how to swim before he could walk. I remember him grinning as he stuck his face out of the water and paddled his naked, chubby little body back and forth between my dad and step-mom. That's how I became a Christian-- I was baptized before I knew any better or worse, as an infant, and so there was never a day growing up when Jesus had not been part of my story. Adult baptisms are remarkably powerful, because they include an affirmation that is a true choice to take on the faith, made in thoughtful discernment. I am often inspired to the point of tears to watch an adult or teenager make their baptismal vows. But infant baptism reflects the grace of God choosing us without our initiative or effort. There is nothing we have to do to earn this gift-- it belongs to us as much as our DNA belongs to us.

People say they learn to swim, or teach their kids to swim, for a variety of reasons. One of the big reasons is that it could save your life. Whether you're running in a party and accidentally fall into a pool, or you're wading at the beach and suddenly get pulled into a rip-tide, being a strong swimmer can help keep you safe. Swimming is also great for your health. It works many muscles at once, and makes a strong heart and lungs. It's one way of being athletic, and is one of those sports that can be practiced individually and as a team. But most of all, swimming can cause great joy. Our bodies relax in the water. The cool refreshment puts smiles on faces. Pools bring people together, and are places of laughter and play.

These reasons for swimming actually make for good reasons for being Christians. Now, some start their faith journey to save their lives. In an interesting editorial over the weekend, called "Why Do People Believe in Hell," author David Bentley Hunt suggests that "The idea of eternal damnation is neither biblically, philosophically, nor morally justified. But for many it retains a psychological allure" (NYT, Jan. 10, 2020). His reasoning is that for some, the idea that some people are writhing in an eternal hell makes the idea of heaven sweeter. I don't get the sense in our church that that is where people find life-saving truth. But I can tell you that there have been life-saving conversations that have taken place in this very church. You see, there is something life-saving about being assured that God loves you.

A Christian spirituality can help us be healthier too. Research certainly shows that believers overall tend to be less depressed, less anxious, and more resilient than nonbelievers.¹ Now, if you don't fit into that category, I see you, and I don't want you to feel alone. But that is another benefit of being in the church. You *don't have* to be alone. We are all part of the body of Christ, and as such we bear one another's joys but also sufferings together. You don't have to hold it all on your own. Like a swimming team, there are many Christian practices you can do on your own. But you are still part of the team, and whether you are the strongest member or the weakest member or somewhere in between, you still belong and we are rooting for you.

When I took my first swimming lesson, my swimming career did not end there. It was only the beginning of something that became a lifelong joy. Similarly, we hope the baptismal font marks the beginning of a journey that carries through your whole life, and which brings you joy.

¹Bryan Walsh, "Does Spirituality Make You Happy?" in *Time: The Science of Happiness* 6/10/2016

Let me share a story that gets to the heart of the joy God expresses through this baptismal relationship.

Over the weekend Michael Hinton from our church posted a YouTube video of a concert that was held in our sanctuary in December. It was for Michael's percussion student, Sho. Sho is a 6 year old, Japanese boy who has Down Syndrome. He's been taking lessons with Michael for 2 years and has participated with his drumming in our summer worship once or twice. The entire concert showcased Sho and his use of a variety of percussion instruments with his family and friends. Michael hosted the concert and spoke as the Julliard-trained professional he is as he described with care the special touch Sho has with his hands on the drums. As Sho moved from instrument to instrument, Michael played alongside him. I could see Sho break out into a huge smile many times during the performance and it occurred to me how rewarding it must be for Michael to teach someone who smiles like that. At one point, Sho was playing a sideways drum. If he ran and jumped while hitting the drum, Michael ran and jumped while hitting the drum. If Sho leaned backwards so his head was upside down before swinging forward and hitting the drum, Michael did that. If Sho called out, Michael called out. It was a beautiful moment, with the child leading and Michael as the adult entering whatever world of childish delight Sho was playing in. It reminded me of how God slipped into human skin to become one of us, in all our vulnerability and delight. But I'm not sure which one-- Sho, or Michael--reminded me more of God, and maybe that is the point.

The other thing I noticed while I was watching the video was that the baptismal font was right there, beside Sho and those drums. Now I'm not sure whether or not Sho is Christian, but it simply doesn't matter for the message to be clear. You are beloved, child. In you I am well pleased. Sho's joy during that concert, and Michael bringing out his belovedness for all to see, is the kind of message God was trying to express and share with the people in the moment of Jesus' baptism, and each baptism following that. As I was noticing how beloved Sho was when I was watching his video, I somehow felt better loved too. It gave me a sense of the remarkable amount of love God has to go around, a love that helps me love the outcast better, and to love myself better.

You should know that Sho had a couple other background percussionists, who were accompanying him throughout the concert. And at the end, Sho's young friends all got to come up and try an instrument too, and boy, did they play what was on their hearts! And that is just the nature of these baptismal waters. They pull us towards one another and call us to delight in being God's beloved children, and to recognize the belovedness in one another.

So if you are one of those who has been clinging to the walls, let me invite you to trust the waters, and discover the challenges and joys it can offer to you. At first you might find you are just splashing around without getting anywhere. But with regular practice, like coming to church, committing to service and prayer, practicing forgiveness, and seeking growth with other Christians, you will find more and more you actually know what you are doing.

Claiming the waters of baptism for your life doesn't mean there won't sometimes be a flood, or a rip-tide, or other challenge that feels frightening or dangerous. For some people, this is the case more often than not and it just does not seem fair. But we follow someone who is willing to step out onto the waters that are battering our boat. He calls to us, inviting us to walk on water with him. The prophet in Isaiah promises, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." For the bruised reeds among us, this is good news. I am quite convinced that this is a God whose love will not abandon us when we feel we are drowning.

Being loved like that surely shapes how we must live. The prophet in Isaiah gives this message: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

So, who's ready to dive in?

Blessing of Water

Let us pray:

We thank you, God, for the gift of creation called forth by your saving Word.

Before the world had shape and form, your Spirit moved over the waters.

Out of the waters of the deep, you formed the firmament and brought forth the earth to sustain all life.

In the time of Noah you washed the earth with the waters of the flood, and your ark of salvation bore a new beginning.

In the time of Moses and Miriam your people Israel passed through the Red Sea waters from slavery to freedom and crossed the flowing Jordan to enter the promised land.

In the fullness of time you sent Jesus Christ who was nurtured in the water of Mary's womb.

Jesus was baptized by John in the water of the Jordan, became living water to a woman at the Samaritan well, washed the feet of the disciples, and sent them forth to baptize all nations by water and the Holy Spirit.

(As the following words are spoken, the water may be poured into a basin or font.)

Bless by your Holy Spirit, gracious God, this water that by it we may be reminded of our baptism into Jesus Christ and that by the power of your Holy Spirit we may be kept faithful until you receive us at last in your eternal home.

Glory to you, eternal God, the one who was and is, and shall always be, world without end. Amen.

The Congregation Remembers Baptism

**God who shows no partiality,
show your favoritism on all your people.
Send forth your justice for all to see.
Save us your people.
Empower us to preach and testify to your great love and mercy.**

**God who makes and keeps covenant with your people,
You called us to be a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to set the prisoners free,
Help us to answer your call that these things come to pass.**

**God of grace and glory,
We pray for those who suffer from pains and sorrows.**

**We pray for those whose hearts are broken.
We pray for those who struggle to survive mental health challenges.
We pray for those whose families are fractured.
We pray for those whose lives are ravaged by war.
We pray for those who struggle with poverty, and starvation
We pray for Australia, Puerto Rico.
We pray for Jenny, Lito,
We pray with delight for the healthy birth of Sibonike Mwenifumbo's daughter Imani Miracle on Thursday, and pray that God be with Sibonike, Imani, Jeremiah, and James on the challenges that lie ahead.**

**Thank you for hearing our prayers.
Thank you for pouring out your Spirit on your son
and pouring your spirit out on us too.
May we too hear you say to us this day that
"This is my child, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased."
Amen**