

To Catherine Amy Brown on Her Baptism
The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick
August 2, 2009
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 13, Year B
Baptism of Catherine Amy Brown

Ephesians 4:1-16
John 6:24-35

Catherine:

You have no idea what I'm saying right now or what we are all doing in this place. A place where you have been twice but slept through the service both times. But perhaps in the years to come your parents, godparents or grandparents might tell you a little about what is happening to you here today.

You have been brought to this place because those who love you have felt it to be right and proper that you be introduced into a larger family or community than the one you have known (or more appropriately felt) so intimately during the first five months of your life. Biologically you are absolutely dependent upon the immediate family of your mother and father and those they have invited to join them in caring for you on a daily basis.

In a strictly biological sense, therefore, you don't need this second family that is now gathered around you at this time of your baptism. What we are doing here this morning is not like going to your pediatrician or getting nursed by your mom or given your bottle by your dad or cooed at by your grandparents. The group of people here this morning is engaged, symbolically, in something different, though no less important, regarding your care and well-being. We are welcoming you into a larger community that we hope you will eventually come to feel is a part of your life. We are a diverse and very wide community that includes people of very different backgrounds and personalities and which sometimes is closer to a dysfunctional family than it is to the tight-knit family you have known so far at home. But it is a real family and it exists because it knows that beyond our immediate families we are all part of a larger body of people who have been called into being by God.

So why do we want you to join this larger family? Why do we ask not only your parents but your godparents to stand here with you this morning and recite vows and make commitments regarding your life in this community? The answer is simple, though the life you will lead as a baptized person will not be. We are gathered this morning because we believe that no matter how loving your immediate family is, there is a larger, less-intimate world out there in which you will eventually take your place as an individual person in your own right. And that world is both a place where God will give you the gifts to be an engaged participant and will protect you against the very worst that that world can throw at you. This ceremony of baptism this morning is not providing you with a cocoon or shield behind which you can hide from the world. Rather it is providing you with a multitude of supporters who will stand by you as you go forth into that world, finding your own unique place in it. Each step along the way the hands that will literally hold you as you begin to walk will gradually let go until you can walk on your own. But walking on your own is not the same as walking without the help of others when you stumble and fall. This community, along with your immediate family, is promising to do all in its power to support you in your new life in Christ. We won't walk for you but we promise that we will walk with you and be there for you no matter where your journey takes you and no matter what you meet along the way.

In the reading from St. Paul this morning we find him reflecting on what it means to live in that larger world that you are slowly being introduced to. If you open yourself to the loving support of God as it is manifested in the support of God's community you will find a life worthy of the calling to which you have

been called. We don't yet know what that life will be. You certainly have an extraordinary model in your parents who, as physicians, have accepted the call to be in the ministry and profession of healing. That may not be the calling to which you are called but their example will always remind you that the healing of others is at the very heart of the mission of the Church. Paul refers to the whole body, the community which you are joining today, as joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love. Your dad knows a lot about ligaments and your mom and dad together know a lot of about what promotes the body's growth and health. But in this larger community into which you are being baptized you will learn a great deal about the multitude of other ways that a large body of people needs to build itself up into a community of love and compassion and spiritual healing. In addition to the arts of medical healing, there are those in the world who are hungering and thirsting, not just for material food and water, but for righteousness and justice in the ordering of their whole lives. And as part of this new community of the Church, you will discover a vast array of opportunities, models, and resources for learning how to be a person of mercy and justice yourself, no matter what vocation you eventually accept. In this body of the Church, as Paul reminds us, the gifts God gave were diverse and many, but they were all intended 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 of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, and to the measure of the full stature of Christ. Your gifts are yet to be discerned. You are going to live in a world much larger than yourself and your immediate family. And what we do here today, by the grace of God, will open you to God's world and invite you to embrace it, reform it, purify it, heal it, and love it. It is ultimately God's world and with the help of the community into which you are being baptized, you, too, are called to love it and flourish in it because it was made for you.

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