

SERMON- Proper 7 (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Psalms 69: 8-11, ~~(12-17)~~, 18-20

Romans 6:1b-11

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

June 21, 2026

Matthew 10:24-39

OPENING:

Asked if he believed in the practice of infant baptism, Mark Twain reportedly replied: "Believe in it? Hell, I've seen it done with my own eyes!"¹

What do we *believe* about Baptism? What do we *believe* is happening today? What *did* we believe happened at our own baptisms?

We are going to investigate that question today, using:

...well... NOT using the Scriptures afforded to us this Sunday,

(what an odd Gospel on Father's Day: "man against his father!")

using INSTEAD the Baptismal rite that we use each time we do a baptism,

using the 1928 *Prayer Book*, the "Rite I theology", printed again on the front of your bulletin—which represents a liturgical "hangover" from the past.²

We will even, dangerously perhaps, compare our "beliefs" in Baptism with other Christian denominations.

Most important we will use the example of Margot Vivian Ritchey, being baptized this morning into the Christian faith, and into this family at St. Timothy's.

BAPTISMAL FAMILY

The Ritchey family—Jen and Tyler, kids Margot and Conrad—came to us a year plus ago and have been a blessing to our parish.

They came on a Sunday when I happened to not be here, and Todd, our organist, sent me a message after that first visit. It reads, in part:

*I hope (Jen) comes back! She came up (to me) and said how much she appreciated the music and that she's been church hopping. From hearing her talk, she sounded like she knows and likes music so I invited her to sing with us and also come back on a Sunday when you are there and on a day when it's not cloudy out! I told her how much fun we have in the choir, how cool and awesome you are (!), and how pretty it is in the sanctuary when the sun is out. LOL! I was really trying to sell US to her because she just seems like someone we need. She's probably about (years in age) and super sweet. She said our music was the best of any of the other churches she's visited.*³

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/love-among-the-ruins>

² Turrell, James. "The 1979 Prayer Book's Baptismal Office and the Potential of Revision" in Prichard, Robert W., ed. 2018. *Issues in Prayer Book Revision*. New York: Church Publishing, 89.

³ Email 2/16/2025

“Signed, sealed, delivered”... right?

So, early on, I talked with the family about baptism.

It’s one of my favorite things to do, not because I have all the answers but because I just love to hear where other parents are with this thing called Church, and the weird way that you join, by water and the 3-fold name of our Trinitarian God.

Usually those families veer into the other sacraments, namely Eucharist, and usually after I spend some time trying to explain the Anglican theology of baptism—parents ask: “So... what about what the Catholics do?”

Then I have to cross the Tiber River and say that Roman Catholics, generally, practice infant baptism but also have something called 1st Communion where at a certain age, young person take a class where they learn the faith and then are admitted to receive communion, in a ceremony known as 1st Communion. (My son has had friends recently who have done this and is very jealous of the party and attention involved with it.)

Regardless, over the last year and a half, in my conversations with the family, it became the plan, to kind of see how it goes with Margot and her younger brother Conrad in terms of Baptism and St. Timothy’s and the Episcopal Church.

What moved the needle was... the Holy Spirit... specifically in the form of Margot’s time in Godly Play. It was her experience downstairs with her peers and with our gifted teachers that made her want to get baptized.

Gold star to her, Gold Star to our Sunday School teachers, Gold star to Todd for, beyond just being welcoming, reaching out and connecting with someone new to our community.

1979 PRAYER BOOK

And Gold Star, while we are at it, to the 1979 Prayer Book which pushed Baptism, not for infants, but for those who could make such a choice at an older age.

...For Adults, specifically, but also Margot who is a very mature 8.

Therefore, Baptism is not merely (in the words of a liturgical scholar): a “milestone rite for babies”... it’s not “child’s play” or a “genetic inheritance.”

But, rather, Baptism involves serious preparation, a kind of “conversion therapy” where those to be baptized bring their personal narratives with them to the font,

emphasizing discipleship and a commitment to what comes next.⁴

The new Prayer Book, thus, wanted adult baptism to be the new norm. It looked out at the world and realized that we were living in a post-Christian age. The Culture no longer represented the Church and so therefore joining the church (Baptism) would need to be done by grown-ups who were choosing something different.

The Prayer Book was right about the diagnosis, the treatment plan did not work.

We, other than Todd, have not really evangelized adults successfully, and we still practice, mostly, infant baptism in this “hangover” continued from previous prayer books.

To recap: the framers of the prayer book said that we should be baptizing adults, and we should do it on Sundays, and we should connect it to Eucharist which happens every Sunday.

The Church said YES, we should do it on Sunday, and YES you should be able to take Communion after being Baptized and NO, let’s keep infant baptism as what we (normally) do.

That’s okay too: I baptized my own son as an infant and think, as a parent and a priest, that that is a great time for someone to be baptized. Next time we have an infant baptism, I will talk about how it’s God’s grace that saves, and that we cannot do anything to achieve that.

INFANT BAPTISM:

But, again the Ritchey family is instructive here.

When the Ritcheys were becoming members, I did what Charles does and I searched out their baptismal certificates. The search took me to coal country of Northeastern Pennsylvania, where Tyler and Jen grew up in, deeply Roman Catholic territory of Christendom. After many phone calls, I talked to the nicest of people working at a church in Beaver Falls, PA. It seemed that all the churches had consolidated, the Polish and the Irish and the German Church (St. Mary and St. Patrick and St. whoever) had all become one church, All Saints.

Furthermore, Jen along with her twin sister Jessica, here today as godparent, were both born two months premature. And so the family decided to have emergency

⁴ Turrell, James. “The Baptismal Revolution of 1979” in Prichard, Robert W., ed. 2018. *Issues in Prayer Book Revision*. New York: Church Publishing, 84.

infant baptisms at the hospital.

I worked the Labor & Delivery floor at a hospital one Summer and I have performed and witnessed those—nothing can be more powerful.

And, for centuries, one of the reason that church indeed baptized babies was because infant morality was high.

And, for what it's worth, the Episcopal Church allows for wide latitude in practice and even wider in terms of belief.

CONCLUSION

So here's what I believe about baptism: that God knows us and loves us and cares for us regardless of the family situation that we were born into. That God rejoices when water and the very name of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are declared over someone, of any age.

What incredible examples we have of each this morning, what remarkable witnesses within two generations of one family we can celebrate and reflect upon.

Margot,

I am so proud of your decision. So excited that you are going to be officially, a part of this church. There was time when the Church existed as part of the Culture, and just by osmosis you could kind of get it.

You are so brave to be joining this church. The rest of us grew up in a world where the church was such a large part of our lives that we will enculturate you into this life just by showing up.

So you could get baptized as an infant and that just kind of assume that the church would be there all throughout your childhood and as a teenager.

I wish I could tell you that things are that easy.

They are not: you and your family and this family, we came together to make this happen. We are working our darndest to keep making it happen.

Discipleship occurs through the family, with parents and god parents and grand parents, it occurs in churches, in the choir, and in Godly play and with priests and deacons and pew maters and at camp.

It happens once and forever at baptism at whatever age, and it happens weekly at the Table, and then every day as we pick up the cross to follow.

AMEN