

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 28, 2016

“Water and Dirt”

Scripture: A topical sermon on Baptism.
Note: Creek Baptisms on this Sunday.

I, for one, could really use a bath this morning. I don't know if you noticed it, but I've got a pretty good clump of mud and dirt on my ordinarily clean and white church robe. It's pretty conspicuous, so I'm bit self-conscious about it. But there's a reason that dirt is on my ordinarily clean and white robe, and it's not unrelated to the reason we have gathered here as church this morning, so I want to tell you about it.

That clump of dirt and mud comes from the graveyard. It's not like I was rolling around in there, but yesterday morning it was all damp and muddy, and a light rain was falling when about 30 people gathered in our Memorial Garden to bury all that remains of the body of our Christian brother, Doug Haugland, Holly Eastman's father, and the remains of Doug's own son, Mark, Holly's brother. It's a beautiful ministry of St. Stephen's Church, that Memorial Garden, a safe and peaceful place to remember those we love who have gone before us, but when you're the priest, and you have to shuffle onto the soil, and when you reach down at the right time to scoop up a bit of dirt to place it in the grave ---“...*earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to*

dust...”--- and when that dirt is all wet enough really to be more like mud, sticking to your hands and sticking to your clothes, it’s pretty certain that you’ll end up wearing a bit of it. So I did; I ended up wearing a bit of it. But the work at the grave got done, and we gave thanks to God for these two persons whose course on earth was complete. So I figured I would take my robes home to wash them clean to use today. Until I remembered... I don’t need to. Today, I’m taking a bath. In my robe. In the creek... with Avery and Charlotte and Jim. And we’re not talking any ordinary bath. We’re talking Baptism, a peculiar kind of bath, a holy bath, a bath that’s really more about faith than it is about dirt. See, it was baptism that led me to that grave yesterday, and it’s that grave that leads us back to baptism this morning. Because the Creek and the Memorial Garden are but two chapters in the same story of a Christian life.

In Baptism we anticipate a lot of things, we hope for a lot of things. Baptism brings us into the communion and membership of the Church. Baptism reminds us of the love that God holds for us. We enter the larger family of faith. We hope that it will bring us fellowship and joy, protection from the dangers of life, a good and practical moral sense for living, compassion and companionship, and when the time comes that we must die, and that time most surely comes, Baptism gives the hope for our salvation... a home with God and those we love forever. And we Christians

don't shy away from the idea of life or death. In just a little while, when we go down to the creek, you will hear these words:

“We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.”

(The Book of Common Prayer, page 306)

In Baptism, we die to sin and are born again. So what better way to wash from my robes the dirt of the grave than in the waters of Baptism? For the waters prepare us for that grave, and the grave reminds the living community to return to those waters of Baptism.

You know what I love about creek baptisms? They make me feel a little silly. They let me not be so concerned about all the proper stuff of church, rather the joy of it all. It's not quite proper, all that sloshing around in my robes and funny water shoes, maybe bringing another adult in the current to get clothes and shoes soaked in the stream, or splashing all that cool water all over a perfectly dry baby and anybody else who happens to be nearby. But, by the grace of God, it is so truly of the Creation, so tied to the earth and the purposes of God... the water, the weather, the people surrounding us, the sounds and singing, the laughter and clapping, and, of course, the occasional canoe or kayak slipping by with its embarrassed looking driver who thought she wasn't going to church that day. And we are ceremonially washed clean, all of us, we are reminded that we are Christ's own forever, and we are ready to

live life to the fullest, day by day, until the day comes when the earth reclaims us, and the Lord receives us, and the Church gathers again, this time at the grave ---the dirt, the weather, the people surrounding us, the sounds and singing, even the tears--- they consummate this day of Baptism, they fulfill it in the hope of Resurrection. And the dirt is holy, and the water is holy, and the living is holy, and the dying is holy, and you, the people, by the grace of God, are holy. Not perfect, but forgiven. Not finished, but rather prepared to grow in faith and to love and serve the world in Jesus' name all the days of our lives, as long as we have the strength and will to continue.

How grateful I am for these dirty robes and for the water to wash them clean.

I'll see you at the creek.