

It is always a good thing when we stir the waters! The unexpected may happen, like the minister who baptized a woman and then helped her back up the steps of the baptistry. Now this was a baptistry without curtains, so that it was always open to the congregation; and it was a baptistry that had two entrances, one on either side, for men and for women. So the minister found himself on the wrong side of the baptismal pool as the congregation began singing, and not wanting to interrupt the worship by sloshing back across in full view of everyone, he decided to remove his waders and swim underwater to the other side. Not remembering, until it was too late, that this particular baptistry was a glass-fronted baptistry...

But baptism is also a source of divine strength and courage. Many stories are told about Martin Luther. And some of them are about his depression and his physical ailments. During those periods, Luther may have been in such despair that he would see the Devil hiding in corners, or even opening the door to Luther's study and making faces or mocking him. And when the darkness descended upon him, Luther would shout at the demon, or write furiously this reminder to himself, "I have been baptized! I have been baptized! I have been baptized!"

Baptism is the sign and the guarantee of God's presence with each of us, and with all of us together. It is the giving up of ourselves and the acceptance of God's grace and love and power and forgiveness. It is new birth, the putting off the "old man," as the old translations have it, the old nature, and the old ways of acting; and putting on the new man, the new relationship with God, like "putting on" new clothing- that's the meaning of the word; or better, new skin, because it is a permanent newness; or better still, a new heart, because it is a new person with a new perspective and developing new habits, the ones our passage in Colossians describes for us.

It is not by accident that for centuries now the candidates for baptism have worn white robes, for white represents not only purity and God's forgiveness, but also newness. The "putting on the new" abolishes barriers, things that separate us, for baptism marks a new beginning, a new creation, and as verse 11 tells us, where there are no longer national divisions, or social or economic, or even religious, but "Christ is all and in all."

So this putting off and putting on is not just a command to Marilyn. It is for all of us. Baptism is the beginning of a new life, but not simply a personal relationship with Jesus, rather a personal relationship with Jesus who is the Lord of

the person next to me in church, and the person on the other side of the building whom we may sometimes try to avoid; Jesus is Lord of the person on the other side of the tracks; Lord of the person on the other side of the ocean. Baptism is the beginning of a new personal relationship with others. And we deal with other people in this new way: by putting on humility and helpfulness and forgiveness, what one author has called, “mutual kindness,” and in the words of our passage, “Bearing with one another, forgiving one another”; and especially putting on the selfless love of Christ which makes us one.

We are united, not just us in this place, but all who have been baptized; all of us, despite different flesh tones or backgrounds or political philosophies, because we have “died with Christ,” as Colossians 2 has it, and “we have been raised with Christ,” chapter 3, verse 1; raised as new creatures, raised as God’s beloved children. And this is the way we behave: in gratitude and joy and sacrificial friendship with the others God, in Christ, has called to himself.