



A Rite for the Stillborn

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ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES FOR ANYONE TO FACE IS THE DEATH of a loved one, particularly a sudden or untimely death. The sudden wrenching loss and dark finality of death once again remind us of how vulnerable we are. Certainly one of the most difficult and painful of all deaths is the death of a young child or infant. When one of these tiny innocents dies, the world can seem a gruesome and chaotic place for the parents—and for all of us. The tender love and hope which was embodied in their infant has been torn from their arms. As pastoral caregivers, we, too, are confronted with the questions that such an event provokes. The loss of an infant by stillbirth or neonatal death seems terribly tragic and unjust.

Pastoral caregivers are called to respond with compassion and support. By the nature of our office we are called also to respond with theological integrity. How then do we respond to a parental request that their dead child be baptized? This question, the tension it reveals between pastoral ministry and theological integrity, is the subject of this article.

I. PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two basic perspectives emerge in the search for a compassionate response to

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stillbirth that is both theologically and pastorally appropriate. They appear to be antithetical. The more conservative theological perspective examines and subscribes to the traditional view of the sacraments. From this perspective, God's will is hidden, and since baptism is a "sacrament for the living" the dead son or daughter is entrusted and/or commended to God's mercy.¹ This was the situation for one pastoral caregiver. When the parents requested him to baptize their dead child, he replied carefully but gently, "Baptism is not necessary. Your child now sleeps in the arms of Jesus." In this statement, the traditional western Christian view of baptism is maintained. The minister did not compromise sacramental theology to serve the parishioners' request.

Granted, traditional theology has been earnestly and, one would like to think, sensitively maintained in this situation: the theologically faithful response is to decline a parental request for baptizing a dead infant. Baptism is a sacrament in which the child is sealed by the water and word for life. The child is initiated into the community.² Understandably, it seems nonsensical or, at best, theologically inappropriate to baptize a dead infant. Yet what of the importance attached to baptism by the parent(s)?

The pastoral aspects of this issue must also be addressed. Within much of Christian tradition, baptism is the only sacrament that is expressly anticipated for infants. It is the only rite practiced in the church in which some sort of naming of the child occurs. This not only gives the child a personal name, but also names the child as a part of the community. Baptism is the only ritual in the Christian tradition signifying that, above all, the person belongs to God.³ This is publicly recognized in baptism. When parent(s) request baptism for their dead newborn, they are requesting an acknowledgement of the presence of God in the midst of their profound loss. They are requesting a recognition of the specialness and personhood, the hopes and dreams embodied in their child. If a pastoral caregiver were to deny the parental request to baptize a stillborn infant, it may be tantamount to a denial of the life and significance of their child. The parental attachment to this life is very real and must not be minimized in any fashion. Unfortunately, since this type of death is so difficult to comprehend, unhelpful clichés are often offered by well-meaning persons, and the life of the child and the feelings of the family become minimized. The parental need for some word, some act that recognizes and embraces their very real loss and profound grief becomes a request for baptism. This request for baptism is a cry for God, for a ritual for remembering that God remembers.⁴

In light of such a cry for God, and confronted with the pastoral and spiritual needs of the parent(s), baptism may, indeed, seem appropriate. Baptism can be

¹Martin Luther, *Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage* (1542), LW 43:247-250.

²For further discussion of baptism as initiation into the Christian community, see Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy* (Birmingham: Religious Education, 1985) 138-167.

³Ronna Case, "When Birth is Also a Funeral," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 32 (1978) 13.

⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

understood to represent God's presence and promise of new life, even in the tragic and senseless death of a fetus or infant. The parents are reminded of the "realness" of their child, and the tangible presence of God's promises of salvation, forgiveness, and eternal life. Baptism could be an opening and a closure for parents in their recognition of their child's identity in Christ and of their own devastated hopes and dreams. The dead son or daughter's baptism may also provide hope, while also beginning a time of grief. During such a time of parental grief, baptism retains a deep significance: that of God's promise to name and claim every baptized child as one of God's own beloved children. Should we then, as pastoral caregivers, baptize a stillborn child when met with such a request and abandon theological soundness for empathic pastoral care? Subscribing completely to one perspective (theological tradition) or another (pastoral care) is inadequate or at best incomplete. The tension is expressed quite clearly by Janet S. Peterman:

Baptism is inappropriate in the case of a stillbirth to the extent that it denies God's ability to be merciful and takes the sacrament out of its biblical context of a call to repentance and faith.

On the other hand, baptism is appropriate in the case of a stillborn child inasmuch as the church has no commonly recognized rite for acknowledging a loss in pregnancy. Parents who suffer a loss in pregnancy need to experience what is affirmed in baptism: (1) the child's uniqueness before God; (2) the child's belonging to the community of faith; (3) the church's recognition that the death of the child is a real loss; and (4) the support of the Christian community for Christian parents, in this case parents who have experienced a significant loss. In the absence of something more appropriate, it is understandable that some faithful parents who experience a loss in pregnancy will request that the child be baptized.⁵

Elaine Ramshaw also recognizes these tensions. She states that there seems to be the "old split between counselors and ritualists surfacing through the conflict between therapeutic norm and the theological norm for ritual action."⁶ She then takes the issue further by suggesting there need be no tension between theologically faithful ritual and sensitive pastoral care; there may, in fact, be a more appropriate and empathic ritual response, better suited to meet the particular needs of the tragic situation.⁷

In fact, there is a more suitable response that strikes a balanced, middle ground between theological integrity and sensitive pastoral care. It is at once both deeply symbolic of God's presence and rich with historical meaning. It is the rite of anointing. The powerful symbolism that is carried in the biblical act of anointing makes it an appropriate response that does not have the same theological complexities as baptizing a stillborn child. The ritual of anointing also carries with it a rich and colorful history of people chosen by God to be revered and remembered.

Throughout the Old Testament, anointing is a practice used to set a person

⁵Janet S. Peterman, "A Pastoral and Theological Response to Losses in Pregnancy," *Christian Century* 104 (9-16 September 1987) 751.

⁶Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 75.

⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

apart as one who has been claimed by God. In the act of anointing a stillborn child, the announcement of God's presence and care for the child will be comforting and graciously supportive. In the Old Testament the act of anointing was often a recognition of something that was already a fact in the eyes of God. It became a public sign of the anointed one's "chosenness." In 2 Kgs 9:1ff. Jehu had already been chosen by God to be the leader of God's people, the king of Israel. The anointing was done to proclaim publicly the name of the one whom God had chosen. It certainly is appropriate to claim for a stillborn child and the parents of that child his or her name, and the fact that this, a child of God upon whom God has mercy, will be loved and remembered for years to come (cf. Exod 30:25ff.).

In the painful event of a stillbirth or neonatal death, the rite of anointing, rather than baptism, is an empathic pastoral response that helps to give liturgical shape and meaning to a tragically incomprehensible event. The rite of anointing, used in the Old Testament in the enthronement of a new king, affirms the fact that all are joint heirs in the kingdom of heaven. This is the status of the child who is stillborn, one upon whom God has mercy, and one who is with God in heaven. In using the tangible symbol of oil and the comforting word of grace, the parent is able to know and remember that a unique and powerful rite has been performed for the baby, who, so anointed, now has a name and will never be forgotten.

The following is a suggested liturgy for anointing at a stillbirth. It can be suggested by the pastor as something that can and should be done. By offering a rite that is unique and directed to the specific situation of a stillbirth, the pastoral caregiver is fulfilling his or her role as bearer of God's word with a pastoral rite that provides comfort in grief. The rite is an effort to address the issue of naming and the fact that the newborn baby was indeed life and not merely potential life. The rite recognizes the mercy and love of God and commends the child to God's care.⁸

II. A RITE OF ANOINTING

The setting is a birthing/recovery room or other private place, as requested by the parent(s). This rite is not to take the place of a funeral or a memorial service.⁹ This is an appropriate ritual, instead of baptism, to address the acute pastoral needs of the parents and family. Where possible or appropriate, the child is held by the parent(s).

SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 10:13-16

PRAYER

Pastor/Chaplain: O God of sorrow, our hearts are filled with grief too heavy to bear alone. The death of this child, a gift of your creation, has left his/her

⁸For additional reading, see James F. Cox, "Aunt Grace Can't Have Babies," *Journal of Religion and Health* 25 (1986) 73-85; John Defrain, *Stillborn: The Invisible Death* (Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1986); Elizabeth Nimita Dixon, "When Birth Means Death," *Christian Ministry* 15 (July 1984) 16-19; Swanee Hunt, "Pastoral Care and Miscarriage: Ministry Long Neglected," *Pastoral Psychology* 32 (1984) 265-278.

⁹For an excellent service that could be used as the funeral of a stillborn infant or after a miscarriage, see Janet S. Peterman, "Remembrance and Commendation: A Rite to Speak to Losses in Pregnancy," *Lutheran Partners* 4/4 (July/August 1988) 21-24.

mother and father with empty arms and our hearts torn asunder. O God of mercy, we look to you now for comfort and hope.

Silence for meditation

NAMING

Pastor/Chaplain: What have you named this child?

Parent(s): We/I have named him/her name.

Pastor/Chaplain: The name you have chosen for your beloved child is name. His/her coming was anticipated with joy and hope, to become a member of your family and the family of Christ. You will grieve and struggle with the loss of this child. Yet now we can with full certainty entrust name to God's great and tender mercy.

ANOINTING

The pastor or chaplain anoints the child with oil, saying:

Names(s) of parent(s), your child, name, is now named and shall be remembered forever. Your child, name, was created by God's merciful hand. Your child, name, is a beloved member of God's heavenly kingdom; in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

One or more of the following, or any other appropriate lesson(s), may be used: 1 John 3:1a; Deuteronomy 33:27a; Romans 14:7-9

CLOSING PRAYER

Pastor/Chaplain: O God our Father, your beloved Son took children into his arms and blessed them. Give us grace, we pray, that we may entrust name to your never failing care and love and bring us all to your heavenly kingdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁰ ⊕

¹⁰Prayer 283, *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 56.