

THE SACRAMENT OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

(10/18/09)

Scripture Lessons: Mark 10:13-16

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)

In our church, the First Community Church of Southborough, our members come from many different denominational backgrounds and several different theological perspectives. One of our strengths, perhaps our greatest strength as a Christian church, is the enrichment that comes from listening to, respecting, and sharing our histories, the diversity of our beliefs, and our personal experiences of God.

Since our church stands within what is called the Free Church or Reformed tradition, we do not have a single creed to which every member must assent; rather we have a variety of statements of faith that are included in our worship every Sunday. These statements of faith are meant to serve as guides for our spiritual journey.

An architectural expression of our theological tradition finds expression in what is called a divided chancel. During worship we read the scripture lessons from the lectern, which is to your right. The sermon, which is a reflection on or an amplification of the scripture reading, is delivered from the pulpit, which is on the other side of the chancel. This reminds us that there is a difference between the Word of God and our personal understanding or interpretation of it. For example, different pastors might have a different understanding of and would preach entirely different sermons about a particular passage of scripture.

This morning I would like to share some thoughts on the Sacrament of Baptism in the hopes that this might make the event of your own baptism, if you were baptized, or the baptism of your children, if they were baptized, a little more meaningful. It is also an attempt to help us understand what happened here this morning with Lucie and Olivia.

Sacraments are a special part of our Christian tradition. They have been regarded by some Reformation theologians as one of the "marks of the church." As Martin Luther has put it, wherever the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments properly administered, there we have the church.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters recognize seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Confession (or the Sacrament of Reconciliation), the Eucharist (or the Sacrament of Holy Communion), Matrimony, Ordination (or Holy Orders), and the Sacrament of the Sick (also known as Last Rites or Extreme Unction). In the Protestant tradition, we recognize only two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

We believe that a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. The sacraments are symbolic in that they point to a reality that cannot be fully or adequately described in conceptual terms. We celebrate the sacraments as a ritual part of our worship because (1) Jesus participated in them, Jesus did them; and (2) Jesus directed his disciples and us, his twenty-first century disciples, to do so as well.

With regard to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, scripture tells us that on the night before his crucifixion Jesus broke bread with his disciples. He then told them to break bread together as a part of their continuing fellowship with each other and with him. We refer to this event as the Last Supper, and we celebrate it on the first Sunday of every month as well as on Maundy Thursday.

It is also recorded in scripture that, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was baptized by his cousin, John, in the River Jordan. I believe this was the moment when Jesus opened himself to his call. There is no evidence, at least from the testimony of scripture, that Jesus ever baptized anyone, including his disciples. It is recorded, however, that Jesus tells his disciples,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19)

Sacraments serve as a bridge between God and us. Their purpose is to help us to draw nearer to God, to place God in the center of our life. Whereas the scriptures are an historical record of people's experiences of God, and our preaching is an attempt to

understand this tradition and make it relevant to our present life, the sacraments are more symbolic. They are really ritualized symbols.

A symbol is a bridge, a bridge that transports us from one realm to another. The symbols of our faith transport us from the secular to the sacred. Through our sacraments, we enter into the realm of the sacred or the holy. Although the sacraments cannot be fully explained or understood rationally, for they are symbols, for thousands of years they have helped people deepen their relationship with God, and have provided countless believers with a source of comfort and strength.

The starting point for both communion and baptism is our own human need. The sacraments speak to our basic human need for celebration, for cleansing, for wholeness, for mystery, for presence, for community, and for a decision to center our lives in God. The sacraments are communal in nature; they are a part of the worship and ministry of the church. It doesn't make sense to say that you want to receive the sacraments but you don't want to have anything to do with the church. This is why we don't do private baptisms, except under extenuating circumstances.

In our Protestant tradition, we celebrate two types of baptism -- infant and adult. Each makes sense theologically, but in different ways.

The historical roots of baptism actually go back much further than Christianity. A symbolic re-entry into the waters of the womb of life, a ritual of death and rebirth, was an important rite of entry ritual in many religions. Baptism traditionally had more to do with the process of death and rebirth, the process of being born again, than it had to do with forgiveness, the washing away of sins. The death and rebirth ritual of immersion marks a re-orientation, reminding us of Jonah's entry into the sea, his being swallowed by the great fish, and his reemergence with a very different response to God's call. This is why in most religions the baptism ritual commonly occurs in the second half of life.

In the Gospels it is recorded that John the Baptist baptized adults. John did not invent the ritual of baptism; he incorporated it into his message of repentance. He emphasized the importance of turning one's life around, of re-orienting one's life.

This is why John was confused when Jesus asked John to baptize him. If baptism is meant to wash away sins, why did Jesus need to be baptized? It is difficult to believe that Jesus had a lot of sins that needed to be washed away or forgiven. But if we go back to the more ancient meaning of baptism, a symbolic ritual enactment of death and rebirth, a second-half of life response to a calling, the experience of finding one's grounding in God rather than in one's society, then Jesus' baptism makes sense. It was his response to God's call to a very special ministry.

The baptism practiced by John involved repentance, a *metanoia*, a change of life. This is a decision that not everyone is willing or able to make. Following the decision, the decision to follow Jesus, the disciple has the experience of being born again. As we turn away from the false gods that have become the center of our lives, as we turn back to the living God, the source and true center of our life, we are made new. We are no longer tied to our past. This very important personal decision, and the experience of forgiveness that accompanies it, mark the entry into the new life that comes to those who follow Jesus.

In the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, it is obvious that the infant or young child is not conscious enough for the baptism to be construed as a decision. Infant baptism is not the baptism that is recorded in the Gospels, nor does it have any bearing on the deeper meaning of the ceremony as I have just described it.

In the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, the parents covenant to place their child within the context of a certain community, a community within which the parents hopefully already stand and to which they have made a commitment. The parents state their desire that their child be brought up within that community, the Christian community that their child might be guided by its teaching and nurtured by its ministry.

Infant baptism has been described as "setting young feet on a certain path," or as "turning the young face toward Jesus." Through this act, this decision on the part of the child's parents, Jesus becomes a central part of the child's life. The child may later go on to confirm this baptism through the Rite or Sacrament of Confirmation.

In the Protestant tradition, when a high-school aged young person is confirmed, that young person makes a decision, hopefully an informed decision, to be a follower or a disciple of Jesus. When the young person is confirmed, he/she becomes a member of the church where the confirmation takes place and also a member of the denomination within which that church stands.

Not all people who were baptized as infants decide to confirm their baptism. Some, for various reasons, decide to have nothing to do with God, with Jesus, or with the Christian church for the rest of their life. Some decide to explore their relationship with God through other channels, by other spiritual paths. However, because of their baptism, at least if the parents were true to their promises, the person has still been influenced, has been spiritually and morally formed in a deep way by the Christian Gospel and the Christian community within which he/she was raised.

By the way, an infant or child or adult is not baptized as a Congregationalist or a Methodist or a Roman Catholic. We are all baptized as Christians. We later confirm that Christian baptism through the decision to nurture our spiritual journey within the context of a particular church or a particular denomination. But we are all baptized Christian. This is why we are never re-baptized. If I were to decide to become a Roman Catholic, I would be instructed in the Roman Catholic faith through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, but I would not be re-baptized.

The Sacrament of Infant Baptism symbolizes a powerful truth about God. It symbolizes God's reaching out to the child before the child can reach out to God. It is a gift given by God through the church before the child can do anything to earn it. The child and his/her parents are freely offered the resources of the church, the church

school, the pastoral ministry, the support of the community of faith. This symbolizes the free gift of the Gospel, the free, undeserved gift of God's presence, acceptance, and love, God's gift of Jesus that we might be shown how to live.

When I meet with parents to discuss the meaning of baptism, we talk about the matter of whether baptism is magical, whether this ceremony ensures that the child will go to heaven if he/she dies, whether the ceremony wipes or washes away original sin.

There are many different theological understandings of baptism. As I hold an infant in my arms during baptism, I confess I have a difficult time making any sense of how the notion of sin applies to this child. I cannot understand how infant baptism washes away any sin, even original sin. If we are born with original sin, with the element of humanness in us, then it is something with which we must struggle throughout our life. Baptism doesn't remove us from this struggle, nor have I discovered baptized persons to be less sinful than non-baptized persons.

I personally don't think there is anything magical in the Sacrament of Baptism. I don't think anything happens to the child. The sacrament is an outward sign or symbol of a powerful spiritual reality. I do not believe that the soul of an un-baptized infant or child who dies goes to any different "place" than the soul of a child whose parents had him/her baptized within the church. That doesn't fit with my understanding of the God that Jesus showed us.

So both of these rituals, both infant and adult or believer baptism are meaningful and are true in their own way to the central message of the Christian Gospel.

Infant baptism symbolizes the free gift from God, the fact of God's reaching out to us before we can reach out to him, of how God is a living presence in our lives before we are even aware of it. God lays his claim on us from the moment of birth, perhaps even the moment of conception, by planting his image deep within our soul.

There also comes the time when we have to make a decision, when we have to decide what we will do with this relationship. Will we confirm our infant baptism by

becoming a member of a particular church, a particular Christian community? Will we make the decision to set our *adult* feet along a certain path, not based on our parents' decision but our own? Has our experience of the presence, acceptance, and love of Christ awakened within us a desire to deepen our relationship with God?

If we are baptized as adults in high school or in mid-life, which is more my preference, the baptism will be inseparable from church membership. If we were baptized as infants, since the decision was not ours, we need to confirm this baptism as adults through a decision to become a responsible part of a Christian community.

Either way, membership in the Christian church is very important. Becoming a member of a church should be an important decision, the equivalent of the decision for adult baptism. Perhaps in addition to reflecting on the meaning of baptism, we should also give some thought to the matter of church membership. We should ask ourselves whether we as adults have really made the decision to re-orient or center our lives in God that is symbolized and celebrated in adult baptism. If we haven't done this, we have missed a very important part of what it means to be a Christian.

So today, on this very special day, as we celebrate the new life that has been brought into the world in Lucie and Olivia, and as we celebrate their parents' decision to set these little feet on a certain path, let us also rededicate or re-consecrate our lives to the spiritual journey that was begun with our own baptism. Let us reaffirm our commitment to discipleship, to becoming disciples of the Way, that we might become the kind of people that God wants us to be and to walk the path that God would have us walk.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
October 18, 2009*