

BAPTISM: ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

(04/29/12)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 19:13-15

“Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray.” (Matthew 19:13)

“People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them.” (Luke 18:15)

When we have visitors to our church, as we have this morning, I like to tell them something about our church. I like to tell them something about our sanctuary, partially because we have a typical old New England Congregational type of sanctuary. I also like to comment on how, in architectural terms, form reflects function, how the layout of our sanctuary makes sense theologically.

The only problem is that it doesn't. Our sanctuary is all screwed up. Don't get me wrong; it's a very nice place to worship. It's just that when we think about it theologically there are several elements that are out of place.

The year that my family and I lived in Germany while I was studying in Switzerland we traveled a lot throughout Europe. I don't think we ever entered a city or even a town without checking out their churches. Some of these churches were Roman Catholic, some were Lutheran, and some were Swiss Reformed.

When you enter a Catholic church you experience a sensory overload. One is often struck by the lingering smell of incense. There are beautiful stained glass windows, magnificent paintings and statues. In some of the larger cathedrals, such as Notre Dame in Paris, one finds smaller chapels all around the outside of the nave, each dedicated to a certain saint or perhaps containing a religious relic. You can get a religious education by just walking around the church and learning about the various biblical or historical themes that are depicted in the paintings and sculptures. The altar area is always striking, often decorated with wooden carvings and inlaid gold leaf.

The Reformed churches, e.g., Ulrich Zwingli's church in Zurich, are on the opposite end of the spectrum. There are no paintings or statues. There are no stained glass windows. In the chancel area, the area that is set off from the nave, the main body of the church, by being slightly raised and bordered by a railing or a small curtain, one sees a simple wooden lectern and a pulpit.

I can't recall where the communion table is located. The altar may or may not be adorned with candles, a cross, and a Bible. These churches are stark and the tone is somber.

So which ambiance is theologically correct? Actually, both traditions have a valid point. The Roman tradition reminds us that we can strengthen our connection with God through the use of ritual and religious symbols, that symbols can not only remind of us God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the disciples, and the saints; they can actually help us to connect with them as living realities within our psyche and in our lives. In a Roman church, one senses the richness of our Christian tradition and the degree to which all of the arts, including music, have been shaped by Christian beliefs and themes.

The Protestant reformers call us back to the basics. They don't want us to get distracted by symbols, or even by the beauty of religious art. They definitely don't want us to get drawn into worshipping idols, into substituting Mary or some of the saints for God and Jesus. They tell us that everything we need to find God is in the Bible. So in the front of the church they have a lectern, from which the Bible is read, and a pulpit, where the pastor interprets the Word of God and attempts to translate it into meaningful terms for our lives. Since they only have communion once a month, if that often, the communion table is not central. Also, since their focus was more on the resurrection than the crucifixion, we find the empty cross or the resurrection cross instead of the crucifix, the cross with the corpus or body of Christ on it. The altar, the place of sacrifice, is no longer a prominent and certainly not the central focus of the sanctuary.

I think both traditions have a valid point. I guess this is why we have different churches.

This morning, as we have celebrated the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, I would like to comment on how and where baptism takes place in one of these Roman Catholic cathedrals. As you enter the front door of the church and step through the narthex into the nave, there is a chapel to your right and one to your left. Each of these chapels has a beautifully decorated altar area with chairs arranged facing it. Each chapel contains a baptismal font, always eight-sided as is ours.

Baptisms, which are almost always the baptism of an infant, take place in one of these chapels. They do not take place during a regular worship service or mass, but often on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon and attended only by the family and friends of the family.

In this church, which stands within the Reformed tradition, we celebrate the Sacrament of Infant Baptism during our regular Sunday morning worship service. We do this because we believe that baptism symbolizes the entry of the infant, the child, or the adult into a certain community, a community of faith. The child's parents take vows during the ceremony. They vow to bring up their child within the faith, to provide their child with a Christian education, and to support the church in its ministry not only to their child but to all children, to all people. They promise, both by word and by example, to lead their child into a relationship with the church of Jesus Christ and into fellowship with the Christian church.

I would note that the parents do not vow to bring up their child within this particular church; they vow to bring up their child within the Christian church. This is because the infant or child is not being baptized Protestant or Catholic, Baptist or Methodist; the child is being baptized Christian. The child is welcomed into the community of faith that is the Christian church. Later on, when the child is confirmed or makes an adult decision to join a particular church, the child then becomes a member of that particular church or denomination.

To return to the matter of the architectural layout of the sanctuary, I like the idea of having the baptismal chapels in the back of the sanctuary because I think it makes sense to have our baptismal services take place there. Although I do like the idea of having the baptism take place within the worship service and in the presence of the gathered church, there is something powerful about having it at the back as well.

This is because the sanctuary of a Christian church is laid out to symbolize the Christian spiritual journey. Baptism is the first step in the process. It is an important step, but it is only the first step. That takes place in the back, just as we enter the church. The center isle symbolizes the Christian journey. It leads from our entry into the faith, symbolized as the back of the sanctuary, down the isle toward the chancel.

Our Christian journey, our spiritual journey is guided by scripture. So the Bible is read from the front of the church. In this church, as in most churches in the Reformed tradition, we have what is called a divided chancel. The Bible resides on the lectern, which is located to your right. The pulpit, where the pastor preaches the sermon, is located to your left. The two are kept separate in our tradition because we believe that the sermon is a subjective articulation of and response to the Bible. It is the way one particular pastor understands and interprets a passage of

scripture. The pastor is not speaking for God but, in trying to help us understand and encounter God in scripture, is trying to help us deepen our relationship with God.

As you travel down the central isle, in many churches there are stained glass windows along the side. There are pictures and statues of the apostles or saints that are special to that particular religious tradition. The lives of these people help to guide and inspire us in our spiritual journey, especially when we realize that they are not just historical figures but archetypal forms of energy within us. In Roman Catholic churches there are also usually depictions of the Stations of the Cross, the various experiences of our Lord immediately preceding his crucifixion. If we pause to reflect on them, they can remind us of the need for our own death, the process of our own death.

The lectern and the pulpit guide us into the chancel. If we had a larger chancel in this sanctuary, I would like to leave the communion table in the center of the chancel. Guided by the understanding of God that we glean from the reading and interpretation of scripture, we come to the table with our Lord and also with each other. The Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we celebrate the first Sunday of every month, is not simply a remembrance of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples; it is the opportunity for us to be with our Lord in a special way, to experience the sacrament of presence.

Finally, with our faith shaped and guided by scripture, interpretation and the sacraments, we come to the altar. The altar symbolizes death. In the Old Testament it was the place where sacrifices were offered to God. The altar is symbolic of our need to die in order to be reborn, to die to our old self in order to experience the new self, to experience new life in Christ. It is where we not only remember the great sacrifice of our Lord, but where we offer up our self-centeredness, our egocentrism that we might enter into a much bigger, a much more compassionate, a much more loving life.

In our tradition, what is known as the empty or resurrection cross is in the center of the altar. This is because we believe that the message that Jesus came to bring did not end with his death; it lives on. The story did not end with the cross or even with the tomb. It continued in the ways that the disciples rediscovered him following the resurrection. It continues in the ways that we rediscover him as the Holy Spirit both within and among us.

The candles on the altar symbolize the inner light that guides us on the journey. The offering plates symbolize the importance of giving, of sharing what we have with our church and with the world. It would be a strange faith that did not find expression in joyous and compassionate outreach. It would be a strange kind of church membership if the member did not support his/her church with his/her time, talent, and treasure.

When we think about the architecture of a traditional cathedral, we can see that baptism is only the beginning of the journey. It is an important beginning. It places the child within a community of faith. Through the child's evolving participation in the life of this community, the child will hopefully come to know God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and him/herself in a new way. Baptism has been described as setting young feet on a certain path. It has been described as turning the young face toward Jesus.

It is always sad when parents bring their children to be baptized and never again set foot within the church, when they never become an integral part of the community within which they have chosen to place their child. Baptism is not a magic ceremony. It is the entrance into a spiritual journey. The drop-off rate following baptism is not endemic to our own religious tradition. In the Boston Globe this week I read that according to statistics released by the Archdiocese of Boston, in 1970 approximately 70% of baptized Catholics attended mass regularly. At the present time, only 15.8% do.

Like all analogies, you can only push the architectural metaphor of the spiritual journey so far. Within the framework of this metaphor, those of you who are seated toward the front of the sanctuary are probably further along in your spiritual journey than those who are seated in the back row. I will have to think about the traditional seating arrangement in this church to see if that is the case. That would mean that our choir members, who are seated way in the back, are probably lost souls. But for all its limitations, I think that when we enter into a church sanctuary we might reflect on where we are in our spiritual journey and the resources that the church provides for us in the living of our lives.

I don't care what religious tradition you were born in. In this church we have parishioners from at least twelve different religious traditions or denominations. What we need to remember is that we are all children of God. There is a spark of the divine within each and every one of us, the image of God that is implanted deep within our souls. Our parents may or may

not have had us baptized; they may or may not have been members of a church; they may or may not have brought us up within the faith. It is up to us as adults to decide what we are to do about this indwelling Spirit, whether we will nourish this spark of divinity within us or let it die out.

Sean will face this decision when, around high school age, he will decide whether to confirm his baptism through the Rite of Confirmation and to become a disciple of Jesus, a disciple of the Way. We hope that he will. But this decision is not a once in a lifetime decision. Like Sean, all of us continually need to decide whether we commit ourselves to spiritual growth within the context of the Christian church, within some other religious or spiritual tradition, or whether we will no longer tend the spark of the divine within us, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and let this precious spark die out.

I think Jesus would tell us that the more we experience the Holy Spirit, the spark of divinity within us and the more we nurture it through worship and our spiritual disciplines, the more we will see and experience it in others. This experience of divinity in others, the recognition that we are all children of God, is the only way we will break down the barriers that divide us as individuals, religions, and nations. Then, perhaps, the kingdom of heaven that we know as an inner reality might also become manifest as a realm of peace and justice upon the earth.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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