

CHRISTIANS ARE MADE, NOT BORN

(03/18/18)

Scripture Readings: Mark 1:4-11

Acts 1:1-8

And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11)

This morning we celebrated a very special baptism. We welcomed Cosette Walderzak into the Christian faith and into the community of the Christian church. Since this is what the Roman Catholic Church calls "a teachable moment," a moment when not only the child's parents but also all of us who witnessed and participated in this ceremony are open to the possibility of understanding the Sacrament of Baptism on a deeper level, I would like us to think for a few moments about Jesus' baptism and about our own baptism, what it means to be baptized into the spiritual journey that we call the Christian Way, and the role of the church in our spiritual formation.

Let me start with the last point, the role of the church in our spiritual formation and our spiritual journey.

When I began theological school, we were required to serve a minimum of one year in a field education placement, usually as a minister to youth under the supervision of the church's pastor. At the beginning of the year the school scheduled times when we could be interviewed by search committees from several churches, giving the churches the opportunity to see if we were what they wanted, and helping us to decide if this was what we were looking for in a field education placement.

I initially intended to skip the interviews because I had already been offered a position at a church in Northampton, a church that I sometimes attended while I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Massachusetts.

I liked the Northampton church very much. It had a beautiful sanctuary. The pastor was appreciative of my gifts and supportive of my decision to enter the ministry. To be perfectly honest, the proximity of the church to Smith College was also a draw. The Smith College girls were pretty, wicked smart, and their parents were filthy rich. I thought that if God wanted me to marry one of them, I would just have to go along with God's plan. The pastor wanted me to offer study groups to the Smith students in the hope

that they might affiliate with our church. Plus, I really liked Northampton; it was a funky little college town.

When the day came, I decided to sign up for a couple of other interviews. The first two did not spark my interest or imagination. Then I met with the search committee from the Pawtucket Congregational Church in Lowell. The people were old, maybe even older than God. The pastor spoke with a Welsh accent and his false teeth kept slipping. I knew little about Lowell except that it was a depressed old mill town with strong ethnic neighborhoods. I basically thought of it as the armpit of the Merrimack Valley.

By the end of the interview, I knew that I had to accept their invitation. Since my decision made absolutely no sense, I decided it must be a call. I also knew I had to stay in that church with that pastor for the entire three years of my theological education. I have never regretted that choice. My experience in that struggling little church in a poor section of a run-down city was an integral part of my preparation for ministry. The Reverend William Rees became a role model and a mentor. And I met my future wife, to whom I have been married for fifty years, in Lowell. So I guess I did pretty well, or maybe God did a good job placing me there. You have to give God at least some of the credit!

In those days I was a young card-carrying liberal--socially, politically, and theologically. I am still a liberal, though I am not as young as I used to be; I am at least a third of the way through life and my hair is beginning to turn grey. But I still remember a conversation I had with Reverend Rees over fifty years ago.

I was outspokenly critical of the Christian church. I believed that it was more focused on the acquisition of power and money than on being a servant church; that it measured its worth by numbers, by secular standards of success; and that it was not true to its calling to preach and incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I pointed out that the church had caused a lot of wars throughout history and that religious wars, inquisitions, crusades, and persecutions must break Jesus' heart.

Reverend Rees told me he agreed with everything I said. He said I was bringing a clear standard to bear on the church, a standard against which the church should be measured and judged. Then he asked me where I got this standard, this understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and my vision of what the church should and could be.

I was stunned. I had to admit that I had been taught this standard, that I had internalized or developed this standard from the church. The church had given me everything I needed to judge not only my own individual life but also the church, to shine a light on our individual and collective brokenness and to offer us resources for healing. In that moment I realized that for all its limitations, all its inadequacies, all its sin, the church must be an important part of God's plan, and I would have to spend the rest of my life in the church—shaping it and being shaped by it.

The Protestant Church recognizes two sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. They are sacraments of the church. They do not make sense without the church or outside the church. It would be strange for someone to ask if they could receive the sacraments of the church but not want anything at all to do with the church--not be a member of a church, not attend the worship services of a gathered church, and not support the ministry of the church in any way. Yet this is just what many people do.

Through the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, the parents place their child within a community of faith. They ask that community to help build the foundation that will enable their child to make an informed decision about religion when he/she comes of age. The parents promise not only to bring their child to church, but also to be involved in the church themselves. Children learn from example as well as precept. If the parents do not think church is important enough to make the effort to attend, the child will come to the same conclusion. And if the parents and the child do not become a part of the church, their spiritual life will not be shaped and deepened by the teachings and ministry of this special community of faith.

Since a sacrament is something that Jesus did and that he told us to do, we need to think about Jesus' baptism. Jesus was not baptized as an infant. His parents did not make the decision to have him baptized; he made this decision himself. Jesus was baptized when he was an adult. He was baptized at the beginning of his ministry.

Jesus didn't invent baptism, and neither did John the Baptist. Ancient Judaism observed a ritual washing that was tied to the rites of purification. A ritual of immersion was practiced in ancient mystery religions. The catechumenate would enter into a river or pool of water and then reemerge. This symbolized rebirth, going back into the waters from which we came, and then being born into a new life.

This is why many of the references to baptism in the Bible describe it as a kind of death. In baptism we die to our old life and are born into something new. We Christians believe that death itself is a kind of rebirth. Just as we entered into a new realm through the event of our birth, so also we will enter into a new realm, a new life, a new world on the other side of death.

So why did Jesus ask to be baptized? It was probably not to wash away original sin or his own personal sin. It had nothing to do with saving his soul, as in the belief that people who are not baptized go to limbo or hell. It was not even, as it is in our church, a rite of entry into the Christian community, for the Christian community did not exist at the time of Jesus' baptism.

I think the explanation of why Jesus was baptized lies in a quote by the early church father and theologian Tertullian, who lived in the second century after Jesus' birth. Tertullian tells us, "Christians are made, not born." What does Tertullian mean that Christians are made, not born?

Jesus' baptism involved a decision. There is no doubt that Jesus was special from the time of his birth; the nativity stories and legends attest to that. However, there came a time in his life when Jesus had to decide. He had to make a conscious decision to walk the path to which God called him. He had to walk away from the kind of life that most men of his time were living to become an itinerant preacher and healer. He had to enter the wilderness. From that point on, his life was centered in his relationship with God.

Some people are born into their religion, while other religions demand a conscious choice. For example, what makes a person a Jew? You are automatically a Jew if your mother is even partially a Jew. This is all you need to be a Jew. You don't need to hold a certain set of beliefs or go to synagogue, even on the High Holy Days.

In contrast to this understanding of what it means to be a member of a religion, Tertullian tells us we are not Christians because one or both of our parents were Christians. We are also not Christians because our parents decided to have us baptized or dedicated when we were infants. There is nothing automatic about being a Christian. Christian discipleship requires a decision. It requires a commitment. At some point in our life, just like Jesus, we have to make a conscious choice. We need to confirm our infant baptism or dedication and reaffirm our faith within the context of the church.

Many people who claim to be Christian never read the Bible, never attend church, can not tell you what they believe, and do not support their church financially. Yet, if asked, they would declare themselves to be Christian. This way of thinking would be puzzling to John the Baptist, to Jesus, to the apostle Paul, and to Tertullian, who believed that becoming a disciple of the Way requires a decision. This decision can open our hearts to an experience of the Holy Spirit, an experience that leads to a deepening of our religious faith, our relationship with God.

The Book of Acts describes how the early church understood the Holy Spirit. Just before his ascension into heaven following his death and resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to them. This implies that the Holy Spirit is a kind of spiritual energy. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were filled with or energized by the Holy Spirit, and their lives were never the same.

The baptism of Jesus leads us to think about what it would mean for us to be baptized by the Holy Spirit, to die to our old self and be born anew in God. What are the decisions we need to make to turn our life around? What is the equivalent in our life of Jesus' commitment to live the life to which he was called? How do we experience the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives? And how can we experience and share these transforming gifts if we have nothing to do with the church?

We have a calling as disciples, but the church has a calling as well. The church is called to offer the teachings of Jesus, powerful resources for living, to our generation just as it has for generations past and as it will for generations to come. It is not called to entertain us, to make us feel comfortable, to make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. It is called to help us experience the kingdom of God, to deepen our relationship with God through Christ. It calls us to a difficult and demanding spiritual journey as individuals and as a community of faith. It charges us to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

In the vows that they took this morning, Peter and Julia promised to bring Cosette up within the church, within the community of faith. Note that they did not promise to bring her up in this particular church, but in the greater church. If they do not do this, when Cosette becomes an adult there will be no foundation on which she can build. She will have no resources for her spiritual journey. As a child of God she will, of course,

have a relationship with God, but she will not be conscious of this relationship. It will be as if it were not.

Just as Cosette will need to do when she reaches the time to confirm her baptism through her decision to become an active and involved member of a Christian church, we also need to make a decision. We need to respond to the call. We need to place ourselves within the church, within a community of faith that it might guide our spiritual formation, that it might set our feet on the path to which God calls us. We also need to make a commitment: we need to build up the church, the body of Christ, that it might be able to minister to its members, to the community, to the nation, and to the world.

The church is not perfect. This little church is not perfect. I, your minister, am not perfect. We have to struggle with our humanity, with our limitations, with our brokenness, with all the ways that we depart from the path, the spiritual journey to which we are called by Jesus.

But we have a wonderful gift! We have the hope, the belief, the assurance, and finally the realization that Jesus accompanies us on this journey, that Jesus is walking beside us, that he is there to catch us when we stumble and pick us up when we fall.

Because we are members of the church, of His church, neither Cosette nor we have to journey through the twisted maze of this earthly life alone.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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