

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

(05/12/19)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 1:1-11; 10:13-15

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

(Mark 1:9)

“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:14-15)

Happy Mother’s Day! It is so nice to be here together and to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism on this special day. As I understand it, this is the third generation of the Sickles family to be baptized on Mother’s Day. What a nice tradition! I have a feeling that Tom and Gwen are right here with us this morning.

Let me say something about the three slightly different baptisms we celebrated this morning: infant, child, and adult. I would like to begin by telling you something about our church, our religious tradition, and how we understand these three types of baptism.

The members of this church come from many different religious backgrounds and some from no religious background at all. One of our strengths is the enrichment that comes from sharing, listening to, and respecting our diversified histories. Because we stand within the Free Church tradition, we do not have a creed, a dogmatic statement of belief to which every member must assent; rather, we have statements of faith that serve as guides for our spiritual journey.

Sacraments are a special part of our Christian tradition. As Martin Luther put it, wherever the Word of God is rightly preached, and the sacraments properly administered, there we have the church.

In the Protestant tradition, we recognize two sacraments--Baptism and Holy Communion. No matter how many sacraments you observe in your own religious tradition, all sacraments are an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. It is the inner spiritual reality that is important, not the outward sign. We celebrate the sacraments because (1) Jesus did them; and (2) Jesus directed his disciples and us to do so as well.

We celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion because Jesus sat at table with his disciples at the time of the Last Supper. He broke bread with them, and he promised to be with them whenever they broke bread together. We regard baptism as a sacrament because John the

Baptist, Jesus' cousin, baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. It is not clear whether Jesus actually performed baptisms. However, it is recorded that he told 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. (Mt 28:19)

The sacraments connect us with God; they also connect us with each other in a special way. Their purpose is to help us experience God's presence in our lives. Whereas the scriptures are a record of people's experiences of God, and the sermon attempts to make this tradition and the teachings of Jesus relevant to our present life, the sacraments are different. They are more mystical, more symbolic. In fact, we could think of the sacraments as ritualized symbols.

A symbol is a bridge, a bridge that transports us from one realm to another, e.g., from the secular to the sacred. Through our sacraments, we enter into the realm of the Holy. Because they are symbolic, the sacraments cannot be fully explained or understood rationally. However, for thousands of years they have provided the faithful with a powerful experience of presence.

The sacraments speak to our basic human need for cleansing, for wholeness, for mystery, for presence, and for community. The sacraments are communal in nature; they are 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 belong to and support your church. This is why we don't have private baptisms or communion services, except under unusual circumstances.

In this church we baptize infants, children, young adults, and adults. Each type of baptism makes sense theologically, though in different ways.

First let's think about adult baptism, which is also called believer baptism. The historical roots of this ceremony predate Christianity. A symbolic re-entry into the waters of the womb of life, a ritual of death and rebirth, was an important rite of passage into a new stage of spiritual development, a new stage of life in many ancient religions. The baptismal ritual was tied more closely to the process of death and rebirth, the experience of being born again, than to the washing away of sins. A biblical example of this symbolic death and rebirth was Jonah's descent into the water, being swallowed by the great fish, and his reemergence as a committed and fearless prophet. As recorded in Matthew 12:39, Jesus says that the only sign that he will give to this faithless generation is the sign of the prophet Jonah.

John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, did not invent baptism; he simply incorporated it into his call to re-orient our life, to center our life in the God who was revealed to us in Jesus. This is why John only baptized adults. Infants and children have no need to repent, to reorient their life, to get their life back on track, to rediscover their true Centre. They are already there!

John's baptism of adults demanded a commitment to change. Not everyone was willing to make this commitment. Through their decision to follow Jesus, the disciples were spiritually reborn. As we turn away from our idols, the false gods that we have placed in the center of our life, and as we turn back to the living God, we are made new. Adult baptism symbolizes this important personal decision and the experience of new life that comes to those who follow Jesus.

When we baptize infants or young children, it is obvious that we are not honoring the child's decision to be baptized. Through this sacrament the parents 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 the Christian community, 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 the parents' decision, Jesus becomes a conscious part of the young child's life. The child may go on to confirm his/her baptism when he/she reaches the age of discretion through participating in the Rite of Confirmation and by joining a particular church. The child may also turn away or drop out and leave the church. But because of the parents' decision, the child 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 is not baptized as a Congregationalist, a Methodist, or a Roman Catholic. We are all baptized as Christians. We may later confirm that Christian baptism within the context of a particular church or denomination. For example, if I were to decide to become a Roman Catholic, I would be asked to participate in the excellent program that the Roman Catholic Church has created: The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. I would be instructed in the Christian faith from the Roman Catholic perspective, but I would not be re-baptized. Likewise, if my good friend Father Flynn from St. Matthew Church up the street were to seek membership in our church, I would not rebaptize him.

The Sacrament of Infant Baptism symbolizes God's reaching out to the child before the child can reach out to God. It symbolizes a gift that is freely bestowed by God through the church. The child and his/her parents are offered the resources of the church, the church school, the pastoral ministry, the support of the community of faith. This symbolizes the gift of the Gospel, the free, undeserved gift of God's acceptance and love, God's great gift in Jesus.

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

As I hold an infant like Skylar in my arms during baptism, I have a difficult time understanding how the notion of sin applies to this child. I simply cannot understand how baptism washes away original sin. If we are born as fallible human beings, then we are destined to struggle with our humanity throughout our life. Baptism doesn't take away this struggle, nor have I discovered baptized persons to be less sinful than unbaptized persons. Baptism, however, gives us resources for the struggle, resources for our spiritual journey.

There is nothing magical in the Sacrament of Baptism. The sacrament is an outward sign or symbol of an inward spiritual reality. I do not believe that the soul of an unbaptized infant or child goes to limbo, purgatory, or any different "place" than the soul of a child who was baptized. That doesn't fit my understanding of the God that was revealed to us in Jesus.

As I understand it, infant, child, young adult, and adult baptism are all meaningful; each is true in its own way to the message of the Christian Gospel.

For those of us who were baptized as children, there comes a time when we have to make a decision. Will we confirm our baptism by becoming a member of a particular church, a particular Christian community? As adults, will we make the decision to set our feet along a certain path, not based on our parents' decision but our own? Do we feel the need to rebuild our life around a different center? Can we feel the acceptance, the love, and the forgiveness that God offers us if we make this very important decision?

Baptism links us with the church, the community of faith, for it is the church that will guide us in our spiritual journey not only as children but throughout our life. If we never confirm our baptism through committed membership in a church, through becoming a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ, we miss a very important part of what it means to be a Christian.

Many of us were deeply touched this past month as we watched flames devour the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. People who are not Roman Catholic, who aren't even Christian, were moved to tears. I think this is because we all have a sense of the spiritual power of that sacred space, a space my wife and I have visited several times. I think this is because, whether we totally understand it or not, we are touched by the symbolism of the church as Notre Dame, as our spiritual mother.

What emerged in the 13th and 14th century in Europe, not only this magnificent Gothic structure in Paris but also in the hundreds of other Gothic cathedrals, e.g., Notre Dame de Chartres, which I love, churches or cathedrals dedicated to “our Mother,” was a magnificent testimony to the archetypal power of the feminine, to the feminine side of God. It also helped to make us conscious of the role of church as mother—a mother who gives birth to us as Christians, who nurtures our faith from childhood, a mother who feeds us with the bread of life, who gives us the courage, strength, and resources we need for our spiritual journey. I think of the church as a mother who guides us and also corrects us when we go astray—but always in a spirit of unconditional love. I was deeply saddened by the temporary loss of this great cathedral, this amazing experience of sacred space, because I feel that all that is symbolized in Notre Dame is just what we need to integrate into our lives as individuals, as a nation, and as a world.

So today, as we celebrate Mother's Day, we celebrate God's special gift to the world in Skylar, William, Gwen, and Zack, and we welcome them not only into this church but also into the larger Christian community, the church universal. We covenant with Amber and Zack, with Katie and Rick as parents, promising them the resources of the church in their commitment to bring up their children in the faith.

And we pray that God's blessing, God's presence with these children, their parents, and their families, will bring light and life and love to them, and that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, will guide them in their spiritual journey throughout their life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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