

A SPECIAL KIND OF DEATH

(01/22/2023)

Scripture Readings: Galatians 2:19-20

Mark 1:4-11

John 12:20-24

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

“For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

(Galatians 2:19-20)

Today is the Third Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany is the day that the Christian church celebrates the event of Jesus’ baptism. This date is also tied to the celebration of the Wise Men’s visit to the manger and Jesus’ first miracle, the changing of the water to wine at the wedding he attended in Cana. This morning, I would like us to think about Jesus’ baptism, what it means to be baptized into the spiritual journey that we call the Christian Way, the role of the church, and especially the role of death in our spiritual formation and transformation.

I know what you’re thinking! You’re thinking that this sounds like an ambitious agenda for a Sunday morning sermon! You have the sinking feeling that you are in for one of those Sandersonian sermons that try to pull everything together, like the Unified Field Theory that proved so elusive to Albert Einstein, and which continues to elude the giants in contemporary physics. And you might be correct! I do hope you’re not in a hurry to get downstairs to the coffee hour this morning or get home in time to catch the beginning of the Cincinnati Bengals—Buffalo Bills game, which starts at 3:00 p.m. Remember, you can always tape it.

JK—I want to get down to coffee hour just as much as you do! BTW, if you smiled when I said, “you can always tape it,” or when I just said, “JK,” you fall into the category of a young person. Though I do admit that it is difficult to tell when you are smiling, that you get my jokes, when you are wearing a surgical mask. It’s okay; that little problem comes with being socially responsible.

In my defense, I would point out that the matter of baptism was briefly raised during one of our new member meetings. At the time, I gave what I felt was a cursory answer to the complex question about the role of baptism in not only church membership but also salvation. So, this sermon is a partial answer to whoever raised what I feel is a complex issue in the history of the church and in our own spiritual journey.

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 in the fall of 1965, we students 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 search committees the opportunity to determine if we were what they wanted, and helping us to decide which church 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 field education 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. And 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 members of the search committee 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 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 over fifty-five years, in Lowell. So, Lowell has been good to me--or maybe God did a good job placing me there. It is only fair to give God at least some of the credit!

In those days I was a 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 over a third of the way

through life and my hair and beard are beginning to turn grey. But I still remember a conversation I had with Reverend Rees over fifty years ago.

At that time, like my existentialist hero Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote *Attack on Christendom*, 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 what Reverend Rees called “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 religious wars, inquisitions, crusades, and persecutions carried out by the church must break Jesus’ heart. I noted that in our own country, the church (for the most part) did not take a stand against the evil of slavery; it supported it.

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

I was stunned. I had to admit that I had learned this standard in church. The church had given me everything I needed to judge not only my own individual life but also the church. The church not only shines a light on our individual and collective brokenness; it provides us with resources for healing, for growth. 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. And I have.

The Protestant Church recognizes two sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. They are sacraments of the church. They do not make sense without the church, and they do not make sense 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.

Since, as I understand it, a sacrament is something that Jesus did and 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 the sacred ritual of 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 be immersed in a river or pool of water and then reemerge. This symbolized a spiritual death and rebirth, with the catechumenate going back into the waters from which he/she came, and then being born again into a new life.

This way of thinking helps us to understand 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 a new realm through the event of our birth, so also, we will enter 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. Original sin, according to some theological traditions, is the sin we inherit from the "Fall" into consciousness in the Garden of Eden. This "sin," becoming conscious, knowing the difference between good and evil, is transmitted from generation to generation through conception that arises from the act of sexual intercourse, (which makes us wonder about IVF, in-vitro fertilization). The desire to wash away his original sin could not have been the reason why Jesus chose to be baptized, for according to the teaching of the church, he, his mother, and his mother's mother were immaculately conceived.

It also does not make sense that Jesus chose to be baptized to wash away his personal sin. This understanding of baptism has also been a teaching of the Christian church. It explains why royalty in the Middle Ages waited until they were on their deathbeds to be baptized. If they were baptized just at the point of death, since there was no time for them to sin, their entry into heaven was ensured. Clever—no? In addition, Jesus' request to be baptized obviously had nothing to do with saving his soul, as in the strange 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.

So, why did Jesus ask John to baptize him? I think the explanation of why Jesus was baptized lies in a quote by the second-century theologian Tertullian. Tertullian tells

us, “Christians are made, not born.” What does Tertullian mean that Christians are made, not born?

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 make a conscious decision to walk the path to which God called him. He had to individuate; 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 walk away from safety and security and pleasure 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. 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 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 must make a conscious choice. We need to confirm our infant baptism or dedication and reaffirm our faith as we embark upon our spiritual journey.

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, all of whom 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 with a world that desperately needs it?

The apostle Paul tells us that we need to die to our old self to be reborn of the Holy Spirit. Adult or believer baptism is a symbolic expression of this inner process of death and rebirth. We die to an egocentric life and are born into a Christocentric life. We die to our childish beliefs and ways to become fully adult. The process of individuation, the process of becoming ourselves fully and uniquely, becoming the persons God calls us to be, involves many deaths.

I believe it was in his book, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, that George Gurdjieff, the Armenian philosopher and mystic, talked about his travels throughout India. Gurdjieff reported that when he asked Hindu and Buddhist and Sikh holy men to tell him about reincarnation, what happens to our soul after we die, he found that none of them was interested in talking about that. They were more interested in talking about what happens to the soul following the many, many deaths we need to experience in this life. I think Jesus would agree.

BTW, I made this point last spring when, during Holy Week, I posted the following on our church sign:

YOLO

JK

BRB

Jesus

If you smiled at this posting, you definitely fall into the category of a young person (no matter what your chronological age); you are hip! The sign said, "You only live once. Just kidding. Be right back." And it was signed, "Jesus." When Jesus said this, I believe he was talking not only about himself, about his resurrection and return as the Holy Spirit; he was talking about us. He was talking about the many deaths and, consequently, the many lives we can have in this life, and how death, when seen from this perspective, is an agent of transformation.

Thinking of death as a letting go of an old life, an old way of life, an old way of thinking, an old way of believing, an old way of relating, in order to individuate, to grow into a new life, the fullness of life that God intends for us and that Jesus promises us, gives us a way of understanding suicide. In my ministries as a mental hospital chaplain, a teacher, a psychotherapist, and a pastor, I have encountered many people who were tormented by an urge to kill themselves. They experienced what is called suicidal

ideation. By the way, calling it “ideation,” which seems cognitive, fails to acknowledge the demonic power of these urges.

I believe that when a person contemplates or attempts suicide, there is, indeed, something that needs to die. It may be a dysfunctional relationship that you have with your parents, with your family of origin; it may be a poor self-image that is crippling your expansion into life; it may be the internalized voices of your critical parents, voices that you carry with you long after your parents are gone; it may be a dependent or an abusive relationship that prevents you from self-actualizing; it may even be an internalized theology or belief system that is psychologically unhealthy. No matter what it is, something in you desperately needs to die! The urge to death is normal, natural, healthy, and in the service of individuation.

What I am working with people who are struggling with these urges, I tell them that I will help them identify what it is that needs to die, and then I will help them kill it off so that new life can emerge. I have yet to find a person where what needed to die was his/her body. If you kill your body, you have committed what has been called the concretistic fallacy; you took something, a death wish, that was meant to be symbolic, and you acted it out literally. If you kill your body, unless, of course, you are dying of cancer and in tremendous pain, you have missed the point. You will have missed the experience of that special kind of death, that most beautiful kind of death, a death that leads to rebirth, to new life.

This way of thinking about suicidal ideation, of which I became aware during my Jungian training, makes sense to me because it is an accurate description of my own serious struggle with suicide my junior year in college. There was, indeed, something that needed to die at that time, but it was not my body. I would have found this way of thinking helpful. Unfortunately, I did not know this, nor was I in therapy with someone who could have helped me understand it. Fortunately, by the grace of God, I somehow stumbled through this period on my own. Looking back, I am very glad I did not kill myself!

The message of the Protestant Reformation is that the Christian church is in continual need of reform. The church must die to the old and embrace the new if it is to respond to what God is calling it to be and do in this world, in this generation. As individual Christians, 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. 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.

The church is not perfect. This little church is not perfect. I, your minister, am not perfect. We 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. We have the hope, the belief, the assurance, and finally the realization that if we embrace the many deaths to which we are called, we will experience the rebirth, the resurrection, the new life that Jesus experienced and that he called us to experience.

The deep symbolic meaning of baptism, as Jesus understood it and experienced it, involved a death and rebirth. Whether we were baptized as infants, as adults, or were never formally baptized, this experience of baptism can be ours as well. Together, as members of the church, we draw strength and comfort from the assurance that through this process, especially through the wilderness experiences of our lives, we can experience the fullness of life that Jesus promised us. Then, like Jesus, we can share this precious gift with a world that desperately needs it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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(An audio version of this sermon will be available later this week on our church website.)