

Baptized by the Holy Spirit
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22
January 13, 2019 – Baptism of the Lord

Baptism. . . It's one of two sacraments we practice in the United Methodist Church; and it is hugely important. You have often heard me say that we are "called by virtue of our baptism." Our baptismal liturgy begins:

Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated
into Christ's holy Church.

We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.
All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

It was a few years ago now that I received a phone call. A mother on the other end of the phone asked: "Do you do baptisms for non-members." "Yes, of course we do," I replied. "Would you baptize my baby?" she asked. "I'd be honored," I said; and I continued, "I would simply ask to meet with you and your husband once before the baptism to explain the significance of the sacrament and go over the vows you will be making on your child's behalf. Then, we can set a date for the baptism. Generally, we could do that any Sunday morning; but I try to avoid the first Sunday of the month, because we do communion on the first Sunday."

"Oh, we don't want to do this in a church service," she said. I replied, "Well it's really important to do the baptism in the midst of a Christian congregation. Baptism has many meanings, but one of the things that it represents is becoming part of the Christian Church; and during the service, our congregation will take a vow to wrap you and your child in the arms of Christian love."

She repeated, "We don't want to be part of a church service." I asked, "Is there some reason that this baptism ought not be performed as an element of worship?" She said, "No, we just don't want to attend church." I replied, "Well, I'm sorry, but I will only do a private baptism if extenuating circumstances require it." Then I asked, "May I ask where you live?" "Wellington," she replied. "Wellington, then why are you calling me in North Olmsted?" She answered, "Well, I've called every church between here and there, and they all told me the same thing your telling me."

Through baptism, we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are part of Christ's holy Church, the body of Christ; it's another way of saying we are called – called to serve Christ as we serve the people of Christ.

Friends, I tell you today, I am not the force behind baptize. The Holy Spirit baptizes. I am simply the vehicle, the person ordained by the church to maintain the sanctity of the sacrament and officiate over its administration. I am the modern day equivalent of John the Baptist who said, "I baptize with water." But John said, "The one who comes after me will baptize by the Holy Spirit and fire." Well, that one has come. So, I tell you, as I baptize with water, the Spirit of the Living Christ, at the same time, baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Now, don't be afraid or confused by that "baptism by fire." I like to think of it as baptism by energy, by warmth, by light. It was a few weeks back that I spoke of the radiant light of Christ, and how we should be so filled with the love of God that that love would truly radiate from us. Friends, I tell you the radiation starts at our baptism.

Some denominations do not recognize infant baptism. They state that someone must be able to speak for themselves, to accept the love of God for themselves before they come forward for baptism. In the United Methodist Church, that's what confirmation is all about. At confirmation, youth "confirm" the vows that were made on their behalf at their baptism; and it is now my pleasure to be meeting weekly to two wonderful young ladies from this congregation to prepare for their confirmation.

But, as United Methodist's we do practice infant baptism, and we practice it because of our very strong belief in what John Wesley called "Prevenient Grace." In short, we believe that God loves all people, even before they know it, even before they are capable of knowing it. Yes God loves little tiny babies and the elderly, and everybody in between.

And so, at baptism, two very important things happen. First, the person being baptized, be they eight days old or eighty-eight years old, are filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with the energy of God. And yes, I hope and pray that every child we baptize will be so filled with the Holy Spirit that, throughout their life, they will know the love and the joy of Christ, and that they will always live their life so others experience that love and joy in their presence. Now, of course, I know that does not always happen. Still, I also know that God loves them, whether they know it or not, whether they show it or not; and I have every confidence that someday that love and joy will come shining through.

The other important thing that happens at baptism is you. You the congregation, you the body of Christ, Christ's holy Church, you pledge to surround the child with the steadfast love of Christ. You pledge to be a continual source of that energy, that warmth, and that joy that is faith in Christ.

When Jesus was baptized, he heard a voice from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Friends, I tell you that everyone of us

should have that same voice in the back of your head – “You are my beloved child. You are my beloved son or daughter.”

Every morning, when Martin Luther arose and was preparing for his day, he would look in the mirror, put his hand on his head, and say, “You are baptized.” How special it would be if each of us, every morning would look in the mirror and say, “You are a child of God. God loves you. God is pleased with you.” How different would your day be with the constant reminder – “You are a child of God.”

In a few moments, you will be invited forward. I will place a drop of water on your forehead in the sign of the cross, and you will hear the words “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” Not just today, but always remember your baptism. Remember that you are a child of God. Remember that God loves you; and God has given you the greatest gift the world has ever known. Praise be to God.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Help us not just today,
but always, to remember our baptism
and be thankful.

Amen.

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