

Why Baptism Matters

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Matthew 3:13-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let me ask you an important question: **Does baptism matter?** The answer depends, I suppose, on what you believe is the purpose and meaning of baptism. And that often depends upon the faith tradition in which you grew up. For instance, if you were to ask if the Presbyterian denomination believes that baptism is required for eternal salvation (as many denominations or faith communities do), the answer would be “No.” This has been the understanding since the time of John Calvin back during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago.

Baptism is required, however, for church membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Yet, even without that specific requirement, I'd still answer that baptism *does* matter – and not in some magical kind of way. Baptism signifies the recognition of our relationship – our connection – to God, the acknowledgment of God's promises to us, and our response to God's grace.

Baptism is one of the two Sacraments recognized in our denomination, the other being The Lord's Supper, which we will celebrate later in this service. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church that has seven sacraments, we have only two because these are the only ones, according to scripture, in which Jesus himself participated. A common definition of a **sacrament** is that it is **an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual grace and reality**. They act as a sign of the real spiritual presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action (W.1.3033). And though we can tie baptism directly to making a public profession of faith by acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Savior, **Presbyterians look at baptism not as something that we do, but rather a recognition of what God has already done for us**. In other words, we approach the sacraments as **affirming what God promises to us, not what we promise to God. It's about God's faithfulness, not ours**.

Presbyterians strongly believe, therefore, that no one should be “re-baptized,” because that would indicate that the previous baptism somehow didn't take or hold. **Since God's promises don't change, there is no need to be baptized more than once**. That's not to say that we might not need to recommit ourselves. But we do that through a reaffirmation of our baptismal vows, not re-baptism. We recognize, therefore, the baptism of those who have baptized in other Christian denominations. And so that they recognize ours, we are charged, as Ministers of Word and Sacrament, to use the historical formula of baptizing in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Unfortunately, for those of us committed to using inclusive, non-male language for God, that is non-negotiable.

So what are those promises of God to us as they relate to understanding baptism? As I am prone to do only when absolutely necessary, I will now quote from the

Presbyterian *Directory of Worship* (the middle section in our Book of Order) It states (W-2.3004-5):

As circumcision was the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with Israel, so Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church. As an identifying mark, Baptism signifies

- a. the faithfulness of God, ☐
- b. the washing away of sin, ☐
- c. rebirth, ☐
- d. putting on the fresh garment of Christ, ☐
- e. being sealed by God's Spirit, ☐
- f. adoption into the covenant family of the Church, ☐
- g. resurrection and illumination in Christ. ☐

The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ. As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.

Granted, that's a lot to digest. But I remember learning something in seminary that has helped me understand the meaning of baptism. **Our baptism is like being engrafted into Christ.** You may have seen an experiment during your school days of grafting one plant onto another, the results being a flower or fruit that's a combination of the two. In other words, engrafting signifies we are in union with Jesus, that we belong to Christ, are identified with him. The Gospel of John refers to this when it claims that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. **Baptism also expresses our commitment to live our lives as disciples and followers of the ways and teaching of Jesus.** Perhaps the following four points will also help explain why baptism matters.

1. Through our baptism, we are to understand that we are indeed a **part of God's family**. That means that each one of us, by the grace of God, has a valued place in the family of God. And because of that, no one can tell us that our lives don't matter. No one can tell us that we are unloved. No one can tell us that we don't belong. For we are each other's family, like it or not.

2. Through our baptism, we are to understand that we are who God says we are. And who does God say we are? We are not only children of God, we are, like Jesus himself, **beloved children of God**. God is saying to you and me right now, as God did to Jesus in Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, "You are my child, the beloved, and with you I am well pleased." So I encourage you this morning, even challenge you, to listen for that voice deep within your being that calls you "the beloved."

3. Through our baptism, we are to understand ourselves as being called by God. And to what are we called? For one, as Christians we are **called to follow the way of life revealed in Jesus' teachings**. As his disciples, Jesus teaches us that we are especially called to love God, to love our neighbor, to love ourselves, and even to love our enemies. **We are also called, each one of us, to a life of service to others – to carry out the ministries begun by Jesus.** For when we become aware of our own chosenness, our eyes are open to the chosenness of others, like those sitting around you in this sanctuary this morning. There is a unique, special place and role for every one of you, based on

your own gifts, talents, resources, energy, passions and interests, in furthering the realm of God in the here and now.

4. Through our baptism, we are to understand the need to fulfill the vow that the congregation has taken to **help raise and nurture each person that is baptized in the Christian faith**. There are few things as important as a community of faith's commitment to nurture all its members in the Christian faith. And by that I mean not just sharing our understanding of Christian beliefs, which vary anyway, but also how we believe we are to live out our faith on a daily basis in an ethical way. That includes, then, the sharing of our own experiences of belonging to and being part of a caring and compassionate community – our covenant community of faith.

I had planned to end the sermon here. However there is something going on right now in our denomination that relates to baptism. At last summer's meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which I attended as a commissioner from Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, we passed a **proposed amendment to change our Book of Order to allow access to the Lord's Table to those who have not yet been baptized**. That came with considerable debate, as it did when our own presbytery voted on this amendment at our December meeting.

Our historic Presbyterian understanding is that a person must be baptized before one can partake of Communion. The official language of the invitation is that Communion is open to "all who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and their baptized children." But as we learned, there may even be a majority of individual Presbyterian congregations across the country that no longer enforce this. I am among those who have not. Why? **I believe that God's grace is greater than our rules and beliefs!** What if, for example, it is in the very act of coming forward and taking Communion that a person who has not been baptized feels called by God to commit her or himself to become a follower of the ways and teaching of Jesus?

During debate at our presbytery meeting we were reminded of the traditional historical understanding that even though we have an "open" Communion (unlike Roman Catholics, for example, who only serve the Eucharist to other Catholics), we nonetheless have a "fenced Communion Table." I actually had a physical visceral reaction when, for the first time in my professional career as a Presbyterian pastor, I heard the word, "fenced." Might as well just have said, "Build a wall, and show me your baptismal papers." A bit surprisingly, **our presbytery voted to allow the unbaptized to take Communion, with the goal of encouraging that person to become baptized, or parents to have their children baptized, for all the reason outlined above**. As a reminder, then, let me reiterate:

1. YOU are part of the family of God!
2. YOU are a beloved child of God!
3. YOU are called by God to this new way of life and service to further the realm of God!
4. YOU are to nurture others in the Christian faith, and in life itself!

My friends, believe the good news: just like Jesus, *you* are indeed chosen, called, empowered, and beloved by God. And since we understand that it is God who first loved us, and was revealed in a unique and definitive way in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, **our baptism assures us that we are enveloped, cocooned, circled by the love and Sacred Presence of God – before, behind, above, below, beside, and within**. Recognizing and affirming all these things is why baptism matters!

Amen.

Resources: Henri Nouwen