

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 your baptism matter to you?** If so, why? If not, why?

The answer depends, primarily, on what you believe is the purpose and meaning of baptism. For many, that often depends upon the faith tradition in which they grew up. For instance, if you were to ask if the Presbyterian denomination believes that baptism is required for eternal salvation (as some faith communities claim), the answer would be "No." Just over two years ago, our denomination removed requiring baptism before someone is welcomed to partake in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Baptism is required, however, for church membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA). So yes, there is something we believe is significant in and through the act of baptism. But it's nothing magical.

As a sacrament, like the Lord's Supper baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward spiritual reality and grace. We understand these two sacraments as "signs of God's gracious action and our grateful response" (W.1.0204). And though we do tie baptism directly to making a public profession of faith by acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Savior, **Presbyterians look at baptism not as something so much 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. It's ultimately about God's faithfulness, not ours.

Presbyterians strongly believe, therefore, there is no need for anyone to be "re-baptized," because that would indicate that the previous baptism somehow didn't take or hold. Since God's promises to us don't change, there is no need to be baptized more than once. And since these promises are the same for children, before they are even able to respond in faith, we also practice infant baptism. Now, that's not to say that we might not need to recommit our lives to following the ways and teachings of Jesus. For **renewal and transformation are intimately connected to a life of faith.**

It may be helpful to remind ourselves of these promises of God to us as they relate to understanding baptism. Being the polity nerd I am, let me quote directly from the Presbyterian *Directory of Worship* (the third of four sections in our *Book of Order*). I'm sure you will recognize these selections from W-3.0402 – *Theology of Baptism*.

Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Jesus Christ...

The Sacrament of Baptism holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including: dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ' and a sign of the realm of God... Baptism thus connects us with God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation... Baptism is a sign of God's gracious covenant with the Church. In this new covenant of grace God washes us clean and makes us holy and whole. Baptism also represents God's call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream...

Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through Baptism, Jesus Christ call us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world...

When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus' name...

Baptism marks the beginning of new life in Christ. The new way of life to which God call us is one of deep commitment, disciplined discernment, and growth in faith. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, given with and through Baptism, equip and strengthen us for the challenges of Christian faith and life.

Granted, that's a lot to digest. Therefore, some summarize all this by the statement: **Our baptism is like being grafted into Christ.** The Gospel of John refers to this visual image when it claims that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. 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, like Jesus himself, are *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." I encourage you this morning, therefore, 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 be persons who love: 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 and kingdom of God in the here and now. And in a few moments we will recognize the ordination and installation of those called by God, and this congregation, to serve as ruling elders.

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 that means 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 – a way of compassion, non-violence, peace, and justice. 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 here at College Hill.

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 and kin-dom of God in our midst!**
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