

Remember Your Baptism

Matthew 3: 11-17; Acts 16: 25 - 34

This message is part two in a short series of messages, loosely connected for Summer, focusing on some ways that **water is used in the Scriptures to illustrate truth about our life in the Spirit. Last week we looked at the wonderful invitation found in Isaiah 55 - "Come all you who are *thirsty* - come and drink freely from the waters of life!" In the next couple of weeks we'll look at the significance of Jesus changing water into wine, and at his offer of 'Living Water' to the Samaritan woman at the well.

But today I'd like to invite you to think with me about what might be the very *first* thing that might come to the mind of anyone who is thinking about the symbolism of water in our faith, and that is *baptism*.

I guess I should state the obvious here as I start, and remind you of something you already know - Christian churches, generally, don't agree on what Baptism means! The *how* of Baptism (sprinkling, dipping, pouring, immersion) has been the impetus for the formation of entire denominations (Baptists!). The *when* of Baptism is another issue - is a Baptism meant for believer's only? Where does the idea of infant baptism come from?

There are other issues, too; as a quick Google search would point out. Is Baptism a sacrament (which means, is it a *means of grace*), or is it nothing more than a symbolic action? And connected to that - but bigger - is Baptism regenerative? Meaning, does Baptism *save* us? Is it necessary for our salvation? Again, some parts of the body of Christ around the world would answer an emphatic yes to both of those questions - and others would just as strongly answer 'no'!

I have no intention of even trying to answer all of those questions tonight (today). But I will share with you the United Methodist perspective... and I'll try to give you at least some insight as to why we stand where we do on this important sacrament. (And yes, in the UMC, Baptism *is* considered to be a Sacrament - i.e., a means of grace. Along with Holy Communion!)

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I want to focus - at least by the end of this message - simply on one aspect of our Baptism, one that there may even be some unity in among the various flavors of Christianity. And that is the aspect of remembering.

Now, incidentally, while the United Methodist Church has some very specific standards on the practice of baptism, we also offer much more latitude for individual interpretation than some other denominations. (And, in spite of the joking[?] by clergy of other denominations, I don't think that is because we can't make up our mind!)

As a pastor, I can be brought up 'on charges' (meaning, I could forfeit my ordination) by 're-baptizing' someone. We take the "one baptism" statement in Ephesians very seriously! Our stand is that Baptism is valid whether or not the person actually even *believed* it at the time. There is something about the Sacrament that transcends our response - not saying that our response is unimportant, obviously it is.

I can also be held accountable in the same way for Baptizing without proper instruction - so when someone calls our church for a Baptism, they are referred to Pastor HeyYoung, and she will counsel the candidate, or the parents so that they know what they mean by the vows they are taking. We are required to do this. I am required to make sure this happens.

On the other hand, we accept any mode of Baptism. If someone comes to me (and they have) and says that they want to be *immersed* (dunked), it is up to me to find a place to do that. We've used lakes, and local friendly Baptist pools. We also sprinkle (which is what we call what we do here normally - putting water on the head from the font). And, while I've never been asked to do this in my 32 years of ministry, we also *pour*, which is just like it sounds - pouring water from a pitcher over a person's head. Kind of messy, but I would think, a powerful visual. (And with the Jordan River being about 6 inches deep in the area where John the Baptist was doing his thing, this is most likely the way he did it - while people were standing in the river).

We also will baptize people of all ages... and we recognize that Baptism, obviously, means something slightly different depending on whether a person can answer the vows for themselves

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or not. (And so there are two different orders in our Book of Worship, depending on that question.)

All that is to say that we understand that the question, '*what is the meaning of baptism*' is not going to be simple to answer. It means a number of things... depending on where we are in our faith journey, depending on where you look in the Scripture... and beyond that, as a sacrament, there is an added element of *mystery* to Baptism. And that means that no matter how well (or poorly) I explain it, there is going to still be room for God to go beyond what we can understand, ask, or even think. When we're talking about God interacting with humans, there will always be at least part of that interaction that we cannot totally explain, or grasp, in this life.

There was a time in my Christian walk when I was not comfortable with *anything* that I could not completely explain. But now, being older, and hopefully a little bit wiser, I simply say, "Thank God for that!" There is much more going on that I'll ever completely grasp, as limited as I am!

I see the element of mystery in Baptism in the first mention of it. All four of the Gospels open their story by telling us about John "the Baptizer". John's ministry was to call people to repentance - "Repent! the Kingdom of God is near"! Pastor HY preached a powerful message on this a few weeks ago. Then one day, Jesus shows up out in the wilderness where John was Baptizing... and John is confused. Let's read it, and we'll start with verse 11, which is John the Baptist speaking...

**** Matthew 3**

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

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Jesus then went out from there and picked up the same call to repentance as John. Except Jesus' invitation was to 'repent, the Kingdom of God is *here*'; it is among you now!

But John was confused... why would Jesus be Baptized? He certainly did not need to repent. He didn't need to 'turn to God' - this *was* God! Jesus' cryptic response was that this 'was proper (or, 'necessary') to fulfill all righteousness. Basically that he needed to do this. There is something important about it.

Now, commentaries 'explain this' by saying that what Jesus meant by this was that he had to be completely associated with human beings as part of his preparation as the 'sacrificial Lamb of God'. Which is probably true, but to me, doesn't really answer the question. Why? How did this connect Jesus with - us?

I have one answer for that, which I'll get to in a minute - but somewhat lost in this whole conversation is the obvious fact that Jesus (like a good United Methodist) was already affirming that Baptism was a highly nuanced 'thing'... with many shades, or facets, of meaning to it. Do you see what I mean by that? Jesus basically said to John, "You're going to Baptize me, but it's not going to mean that I'm repenting." It means something else.

Now, lest your mouths drop open too far, let me challenge you to do this... look up all the passages that speak of Baptism in the New Testament. And good luck with finding a consistent meaning.

** One of those passages is **Acts 16:**

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. 27 The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

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31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved —you and your household.”
32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

The reference to the Philippian jailer's 'whole household' included any children - or grandchildren - who were living there. Family units stayed together. So, one way you can interpret baptism here is that it was a sign of belief... but if there were young children and even babies in this household (it would have been unusual, given the term to find otherwise), this can be looked at as a sign that this entire household was now part of the "Kingdom of God". They, like Joshua of old, had made a statement: "As for me and my house... we will serve the Lord". A transition had come to this place.

We in the UMC look at Baptism in a similar way. It is then, a Covenantal sign... a symbol of a Covenant with God. The Hebrews had the sign of circumcision (at least, the males did)... a way of 'saying' (or, remembering) we are unique people, we are set apart. Because we belong to God. Now, circumcision itself didn't guarantee 'good standing with God' forever. They had to eventually accept that life themselves, do something to show their commitment. But the circumcision was a sign that God *had chosen them!*

In a very similar way, Baptism (especially the Baptism of children) points more to God's choosing, to God's reaching out to us, than it does our response. Christian faith has always been based on the fact that God loved us *first*. At some point, we have to claim that faith for ourselves - and that's the purpose of confirmation. But what a powerful thing to know that this whole trip is not so much my search for God, but *God's relentless pursuing of me.*

Paul picks up that covenant theme (connecting Baptism and circumcision) in **Colossians 2**

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ *In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. **Your sinful nature was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,** ¹² **having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.***

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So, here we have Baptism as a sign of the working of Christ in our hearts... but also, now, a visual symbol of death and rebirth. Down into the water = dieing... coming up = life.

**** Peter picks up on *that* theme in 1 Peter 3:20-22**

²⁰ ...to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ *and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.*^a

1 Peter 3:21 Or *but an appeal to God for a clear conscience*

Peter (as often happens with NT writers) is not as linear in his thinking as we like in the 21st century. He talks about the water saving people in Noah's time - but it really, was the Ark, wasn't it? He is looking at baptism in a bigger way - and pointing out that this water 'saves' us by an appeal to God for grace. Through the water, God intervened.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul sees a reference to baptism in the Israelites going through the Red Sea as they escaped slavery in Egypt ... which is also a curious connection, because that water never touched them!

But think about this: **The "baptisms" of both Noah and the Israelites served as what theologians call 'types'**. I.e., they were representing something to come, something that would be repeated - fulfilled - in the future. What they were representing was a time of a transition; that is, times when people moved from the old world to the new, from the old covenant to the new covenant. It is not the water that saves, *but the spiritual thing associated with that water that saves*. For Noah it was faith in God. For Moses it too was faith in God. The same for the Philippian jailer and his household.

Peter says then, that it is a person's appeal to God that saves the soul, not the washing of water upon the body. But the water is, once again, a powerful vehicle for that Grace to be made known.

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I sometimes look back at 'policies' that I used to try to uphold in my ministries and frankly, I wonder what I was thinking at the time! One of those misguided policies was that people shouldn't be taking pictures at holy moments in a worship service - especially Baptism! Pay attention to what we're doing, we can always pose for pictures later! That ranks right up there with "Never clap in church", "always be serious" (no, wait, I never did that one!)

Talk about a DUH! moment! Since those early arrogant days, I've come to realize that a Baptism is something that we are supposed to remember our entire lives... it is a statement about we are as God's people. And what a *great* thing to be able to be reminded of that Holy moment by looking at a picture! So now, I encourage people not only to take pictures, but to send me one of them. Because I like to look at them, too!

** [Baptism Picture]

Remembering - in the sense of recalling what God has done for us - is the focus of many of the rituals in our Church. Communion, of course, is obvious - Jesus said, "Do this as often as you eat / drink this, in *remembrance* of me."

In the United Methodist Book of Worship there is a liturgy for "Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows". After the reaffirming of the vows that were made at your Baptism, or were made in your name, and an act of Thanksgiving for the Water, there are these instructions for the pastor -

"Here water can be used symbolically in ways that cannot be interpreted as Baptism..." and the pastor says, "Remember your Baptism and be thankful". (Page 52 in your Hymnal). In the Book of Worship - which is the resource manual for services in the UM Church, there are some suggestions explaining how water can be used symbolically in such a manner.

** And there are four of them

The first suggestion is to invite the congregation to put your finger in this bowl and, if desired, to touch your forehead. A second is to watch as I scoop up a handful of water and let it flow back into the font so that it is heard and seen. So this is more visual.

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A third is for the pastor to make the sign of a Cross with water on the foreheads of the congregation (similar to what we do with water for anointing, or Ash Wednesday ashes).

The fourth was very interesting - to sprinkle a small amount of water toward (but not on) on the congregation. That would be done by dipping the end of a small evergreen branch into the baptismal font and shaking it toward the congregation. This is a representation of an OT practice of the priests of Israel who would sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice with a branch of Hyssop for their purification. I seriously thought about doing that (especially at 5:30, since we were going to be outside!) but I decided that it might be a little too far out of our liturgical practice, and the in the strangeness we might miss the point.

I'm going with option #2...and I'm going to invite you to join with me in the "Thanksgiving Over the Water", found on page 52 in your Hymnal (or insert at 5:30)

**** THANKSGIVING OVER THE WATER**

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Eternal Father: When nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised.

Sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Tell of God's mercy each day.

** In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit. He called his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations.

**Declare his works to the nations,
his glory among all people.**

** Pour out your Holy Spirit, and by this gift of water call to our remembrance the grace declared to us in our baptism. For you have washed away our sins, and you clothe us with

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righteousness throughout our lives, that dying and rising with Christ we may share in his final victory.

**All praise to you, eternal Father, through your Son Jesus Christ,
who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns for ever. Amen.**