

Message for January 11, 2015

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Mark 1:4-11 and Acts 19:1-7

Why baptize?

I am a baptized believer. What does that mean? What difference does it make? What is baptism all about anyway? It's something doesn't seem to happen among us as much or as regularly as it used to. Why is that? Is being baptized still important?

Baptism is definitely scriptural. Even Jesus was baptized. In our scripture passage from Mark we see this happening. John the Baptist (a very appropriate name) is offering a baptism of repentance and folks are coming out in droves to receive it. Including Jesus. He comes as well. He participates in the ritual, which makes you think that it wasn't just formulaic. Something real is going on. By being baptized along with those who are longing for forgiveness and new life, Jesus is saying, "Yes, offering yourselves to God and making your intentions known in this way is important. It is important for me, as well." And we soon see why: When Jesus comes up out of the baptismal waters, the heavens open up, the Spirit descends on him and a voice speaks, "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." This is a moment of amazing divine acknowledgment and deep connection. The disciples in Ephesus who are baptized a second time in the name of Jesus, feel this deep connection as well. The Holy Spirit enters them and speaks to them and through them. "You, too, are my beloved children. With you I am well pleased. Go, and let the whole world know that this is true for them as well."

So, at least from a biblical perspective, being baptized seems to facilitate or initiate a real, affirming, life-shaping connection with God. Has that been true for us? Is

it even something that we can and should expect? What if that hasn't been our experience? Are we missing something? Does traditional baptism still have meaning in our day and age? Does it still "work"?

As I was pondering these questions, I came across an excellent article by Irma Fast Dueck, professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The title of her article is, "It's only water: The ritual of baptism and the formation of Christian identity." Much of what I will share with you this morning is gleaned from her article. She has done some very good reflecting on these same questions.

Is baptism necessary?

"As a teacher at Canadian Mennonite University," Irma writes, "I've been struck by the fact that many students consider themselves Christians, they are committed to walking the path of Christ, and are active in their churches – yet they are not baptized. Some remain unbaptized for reasons having to do with the many transitions common to contemporary young adult life. For other students the resistance to being baptized has more to do with the connection between baptism and church membership. Some of these youth see the church as a dry institution. There is no compelling vision of Christian faith and life tied to the church, so they see no reason to join. Other youth lack an understanding of the significance of rituals and symbolic acts. If it's only water, if it's just a symbol, why is it important? The argument goes something like this: Why do I need to be baptized to be a Christian? I can participate in most aspects of the life of the church, including communion. Baptism doesn't make me more or less Christian. Why is

it necessary?”

Irma goes on to say, “I find these young adults’ responses disheartening, but not surprising. The disinterest in baptism may reveal a lack of ritual sensibility which began in their parents’ generation (and perhaps previous generations) more than it did among these children of the baby boomers. The reasons for this lack of interest are various: Some may assume that the rites and rituals of the church belong to less mature stages of human development, that these practices are destined to become obsolete as reason and rationality triumph. Or perhaps people are critical because believers have sometimes supposed that the rituals of the church function magically. They see a kind of idolatry happening when the performance of the ritual itself becomes more important than the God who is at work in it. Or perhaps the way the church engages in ritual fails to capture the theological imagination of those observing the practice. If it is just water, why is it so important?”

Because water is full of mystery. Ordinances or sacraments are gifts given to the church. Ordinances is the word that early Anabaptists chose to use instead of sacraments. These gifts, these rites and rituals are human actions through which God acts. When we participate in baptism, things happen that we do not fully understand. Ironically, this is one of the first gifts of the ordinances: They operate at the boundaries of our understanding. In baptism, as in all the ordinances, there is a mystery. For some, baptism is a mystery that needs to be broken apart in order to figure out how it works; only then is it put back together. But to dissect it is to miss the gift of baptism that reminds us that we do not know – nor will we ever fully understand – God’s working in the world.

All ordinances and all worship invite us to relinquish control, to let go of our compulsion to manipulate and master. Worship asks us to allow God to move us into holy presence. Rituals such as baptism are participatory experiences that enable believers to move from concrete reality, in which water is just water, to another reality, in which water carries the believer into a world hidden beyond the world of facts and rationality and beyond a linear understanding of time. In baptism, believers are submerged in the reality of God and in the new creation; they are immersed in the grace, love and mystery of God.

Water binds us. Among the other gifts that baptism as a rite of the church offers us is the unique ability such rituals have to create community and foster connectedness. In the service of baptism, as in communion, we experience community both as participants and as observers. Rituals offer a sense of solidarity and unity with one other that transcends differences. Theologically, baptism has been understood as a rite of initiation into the Christian faith and into the body of Christ, the church.

But the act of baptism connects us not only to one another in the congregation but also to our past and our future. Baptism reminds us of “the big here and long now,” a phrase coined by musician Brian Eno. We live in a time, according to Eno, when the cultural tendency is to live only in the moment and in the place immediately around us; we don’t move far out of comfort zones and seldom think too far ahead or too far back. Eno describes this as living in a “small here” and in the “short now.” We see this phenomenon everywhere: In environmental short-sightedness that takes account only of our immediate needs and wants, or in our love affairs with mobile devices that shut us off from what is going on around us, reducing our here and now to the dimensions of a tiny

gadget, albeit one that is attached to the whole world. The small here and short now are also evident in the church. For example when baptism becomes a personal decision enacted in a moment, without regard for its communal dimensions and its potential to give shape to a way of life, it is concerned only in the small here and short now.

By contrast, the long now recognizes that the moment we live in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future. The longer our sense of *now*, the more past and future it includes. When we participate in baptism we locate ourselves in a long now and a big here. We bind ourselves not only to our immediate community but also to global ones and those of centuries past. We bind ourselves to the baptism of Jesus and his followers in the early church who also baptized and made disciples. We attach ourselves to our Anabaptist forebears. And we join ourselves to one another – yes, even to those we don't know or even like. They all become our brothers and sisters. And our baptism connects us to a future in which in Christ we are made one.

Water drowns us. In baptism we discover our identity in Christ. One of the most common ways of speaking about baptism in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters, is as death or drowning. In baptism we die to old definitions of ourselves and rise to discover our identity in Christ. In Christ through baptism a new creation is emerging in which inherited social definitions are no longer basic. In baptism the believer dies to those definitions and rises to a new one. Baptism is entry into the new people, the new creation, the new world. For the early church baptism was the distinguishing mark of this people, and it transcended previous definitions, such as those that separated Jews and Gentiles. It marks a new kind of social relationship, a unity that overarches our differences and separations and creates a new reconciled ministry in

Christ.

But it's only water. The rituals of the church tell a story about what Christians believe about faith and the meaning of life, even if we're not fully aware that they are doing so. Baptism is no exception. The church's rituals are critical in helping Christians maintain their identity as followers of Jesus. Anthropologist Mary Douglas studied various cultures for years, particularly minority cultures living within larger dominant cultures. She discovered that as these minority cultures lost their rituals, they lost their cultural identity and were soon subsumed into the dominate culture. This research is instructive for Christians who seek to nurture and sustain a distinctive identity as Christian people in the midst of broader – dominant – cultural identities.

The early Anabaptists were careful to make sure the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were kept in proper perspective. Anabaptist theologies of the ordinances and of worship were, for the most part, formulated in reaction to the medieval Roman Catholic Church and the Magisterial Reformation. In those traditions the definitive characteristic was God's initiative. Instead the Anabaptists emphasized the human response of faith and love. Simply put, the early Anabaptists were more interested in the nature of the human action within the ordinance than with the ordinance itself. Unlike the Catholic position, water is just water; bread is just bread.

But, if water in and of itself doesn't make a difference, then why baptize? Because we need the waters of baptism. The Anabaptists were ardent in emphasizing salvation by grace through faith and not because of what happened through a ritual or ordinance. But while the waters of baptism do not save us, they do locate us, reminding us who we are and what is required of us.

For some reason, many of us who now practice believer's baptism see baptism as an isolated event rather than as an opening into the way of life or a pattern for Christian formation. Yet as the rich symbolism of the water of baptism reminds us, it is God who mysteriously and continually washes us, regenerating, initiating, calling us into relationship. We are not our own saviors, nor are we masters of our own destinies. When we are baptized in Christ, we not only become connected to one another in our congregations, but we also find ourselves part of a larger story that binds us with Christians who have gone before and provides a vision for reconciliation, as we move forward. We spend our lives learning to respond faithfully to the gift of baptismal identity in Christ. The dying of baptism continues to surround us as we learn what it means to live as Christ's body, a new creation. Yes, it is only water, but it ushers us into a way of life.

This morning, if you have been baptized, I invite you to remember your baptism and to allow God's washing, regenerating spirit to surround you, affirm you and claim you once again. In a moment I will ask you to come forward, if you wish, to dip your hands three times into the bowl of water. Do this in the name of God, our Creator, Jesus, the Word made flesh and the Holy Spirit, who is ever with us. As you do this, recommit yourselves to following Jesus, wherever that may lead.

If you have not yet been baptized and would be interested in offering yourself to God and opening yourself to God's leading through the public ritual of baptism, please let me or one of the Elders know of your interest. Baptism is no small thing. The connection is very real. A new way of life awaits.

Come now, to renew your baptism. As you do, listen for the voice of God: "You

are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.” Immerse yourselves again in the grace, love and mystery of God. Amen.