

Affirmation ~ January 10, 2010
Luke 3;15-17, 21-22, Psalm 29

When the Sunday that commemorates and celebrates the baptism of Jesus comes around each year, I find myself stopping to reflect on the sacrament of baptism as we practice it and as it was practiced in the time of Jesus. This morning I am going to share a few of my musings.

Most often, in our tradition, infant baptism is practiced. This tradition has a long history dating back to the organization of church structure and the development of rules to keep things neat and orderly in the minds of the church fathers. It also was a good way of pointing to church growth because each baby was recorded as a member of the church whether he or she ever showed his or her face in church again. People were taught that if a baby was not baptized in a certain time frame and if anything happened to the child, his or her soul would find itself wandering around in limbo forever. This traditional thought is still present today in faith communities.

Parents often are very apologetic when they feel they have neglected getting a child to church “on time” and having him or her baptized. I tell them that our God is a loving Being and that all children are loved and watched over whether they have been baptized or not. Other parents wait a while because they want their children to have a basic understanding of why they are taking part in this sacrament. I have participated in the baptisms of children of all ages and have found each and every one unique and inspiring.

I encountered the sharp edges of narrow-minded insistence on infant baptism not too long ago when one of my daughter’s friends, a member of a Wisconsin Lutheran Synod church, told her that a baby is not a child of God until he or she is baptized. As such, if anything would happen to Isabelle, my little granddaughter, she would certainly not be welcomed into heaven by God. You might suspect how this rankled Granny Alice. My daughter, Kathy, is a wise woman and knew better than to enter into conversation with a friend who believed her way was the only way. Neither Kathy nor I believe in a God who would punish babies, innocent as they are. We believe that we all are the children of God, baptized or not. When we are baptized, it is a symbol representing an already present grace.

In addition, for babies, it is a time of being named before God and a community of faith. It is a time when parents agree to bring their child into the life of the church to learn the stories of our faith and to interact with others who act as mentors to him or her. Many consider this a service of dedication of the child to Christianity. The service in the back of our hymnal says, “...We recognize this child as God’s child and we publicly name him/her as belonging to the great family of our heavenly Father. We receive this child into the care of this church of God, trusting that, with your guidance and prayers, he/she may confirm this faith for himself/herself when he/she has reached the years of discretion.”

This symbol is the same if a child or adult is baptized at a later age. Once again it is an affirmation that a person wants to be a member of a community that holds certain beliefs and values. Adult baptisms are commonly known as “believer’s baptisms.”

Those who believe in this form of baptism think that it is important for the person being baptized to be a participant in the process and not have it be something that is done to him or her.

In the days of Jesus, adult baptisms were the norm. Thus, he went to find John and be baptized by him signifying that he was going to lead a life dedicated to God. Baptism signaled a decision on the part of the person to die to his or her old way of life and to embrace the new. In Judaism it was considered a ritual of cleansing, signifying a return to God and an expectation of forgiveness. Being lowered under the water represented burial and being raised up represented rebirth. The beauty we see in the baptism of Jesus is the descent of the dove and the proclamation from heaven affirming that he is God's beloved son.

Some believe that Jesus led a pretty ordinary life up to this point, not knowing that he was such a treasured person. They believe that at the time of his baptism he was "adopted by God" and began his public ministry following a time of reflection and fasting in the wilderness. Most of us don't think much about this. We just cherish the beautiful story Luke tells in which he records the affirmation Jesus received upon rising up from the water and hearing the Spirit of God tell him that he was God's beloved son. He was special and he led a life from this point on that truly changed the world.

As his followers, we are meant to be special, too. We are meant to sense that, by taking up the cause of our faith we are affirmed as God's beloved sons and daughters, partners in living our faith and in working to change the world one bit at a time. If we think about the life of Jesus, we come to see that it was never about changing the entire world at one fell swoop. Instead, it was the patient work of reaching out to people, affirming where they were in life and helping them realize their worth.

While Jesus may have sought to tear down some of the limitations he observed in his religion, he never sought to tear down people. He honored them where they were in life and sought to show them a better way. We know this is the way we are called to follow. We are asked to see others with the eyes of Christ, to offer them support and affirmation. When we are able to do this we see people transformed before us as they gain confidence in their worth in the eyes of God.

Practicing our faith, in the manner of Christ, enables us to share the touch of the Spirit we have within us, that same Spirit of God that came to Jesus so long ago as he rose up from the waters of baptism. It is the spirit that assured him and us that we all are God's beloved children no matter who we are or where we are in life.

-- Amen