

## **No Partiality**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17; Psalm 29 1-13-07**

The title of this sermon may not be an exact fit. I needed to have the bulletins done before I left last Sunday evening, so I lifted a few words from Acts that spoke to my heart as the sermon title.

I believe that our Creator shows no partiality in regard to God's creatures and that we all are on an even footing with one another. The direction the sermon would take, at that time, was clear to me.

But a funny thing happened between then and now, life intervened between the title and the writing. My thoughts took on a new focus and the title in my mind shifted to "Reflections on Baptism." Both titles, however, may just blend into one, let's see what happens.

The title shift did not come about in a vacuum. A while ago I found myself engaged in a discussion about the Sacrament of Baptism. I was at a party and had no intention of "talking shop." However, once someone asks me what I do and I reluctantly admit that I am a pastor, I find myself in the position some physicians do. While no one rolls up a sleeve or pulls up another piece of clothing to ask if I know what a rash is or what a bump might signal, I am often involved for long periods of time in discussions about the church, how bad it is or how good it is, what I think of the present pope, if I think forms of religion other than Christianity are valid, what is my position on Creation theory versus Evolution theory, do I believe there is a life beyond this one, why do some people seem to have so much trouble in life while others seem to just coast along, etc., etc., etc. Sometimes someone will launch into his or her life story telling me how they have been mistreated by the church and how they have turned away from That Institutional Church." I am a very patient person and answer, sometimes with caution, all the questions to the best of my limited ability. I believe it is better to be bombarded with questions than to have everyone shut up and be cautious when I am around. There have been times I have been literally raising a fork to my mouth when an intricate question is posed and I find myself far behind my dining partners as I work through their queries. I have even missed a meal or two—not that anyone would notice except for an occasional waiter who thought something was wrong with my barely touched dinner.

But, back to the discussion of baptism. At this holiday gathering I was asked why we baptize infants when that is not the way it is done in the Bible. I agreed that the Bible's way is not the same thing as the oft-practiced sacrament of infant baptism. Biblical baptisms, those we have noted, were "believers' baptisms." A person would come to a baptizer under his or her own power because they wanted to be recognized as followers of one way or one person. They wanted to be initiated into a group and possibly a new way of life. Jesus went to John, thought to be his cousin, to be baptized by him into a new way of practicing Judaism.

A baptism or Christening of a baby is really an infant "dedication." In effect we ask the parents and godparents to dedicate themselves to raising their child in the Christian faith. In Protestantism it is not a magical process which erases sin from the baby or that ensures that if the baby should die he or she will spared an eternity in limbo. That is not Protestant theology. It is simply the dedication of a child and its family to the Christian way of life.

Believers' baptism is looked at as more of a rite of purification in which a person's sins are washed away, or a rite in which someone dies to an old way of life and is lifted up to the new.

In immersion baptism, in which a person is lowered into a body of water and then raised again, the symbolism is that of dying with Christ and being raised with him. Dying to the old life

and being resurrected to the new. People who have been dedicated as babies may choose to be baptized as “believers” when they fully understand what they are doing and accept the Christian way of life for themselves.

Sometimes families become very distraught when one of their members decides to do this. They feel it is a rejection of the faith in which their loved one has been raised. I have seen parents attend the second baptism of a child and feel crushed by their child’s choice. If people can get beyond this perception they come to realize that more than a rejection of their faith, it is an affirmation. The baby has grown into an adult and has discovered a pathway that makes sense to their spiritual journey. It may not be the same way held dear by his or her parents and he or she wants to be initiated onto that pathway. That is not a bad thing as long as both sides of the equation remember that it is not their job to judge the other or to show any partiality when someone changes sides in their faith journey. The journeys we all undertake are between God and us.

The problems always arise when we seek to make someone else fit into our special limited mold. Or, as someone once told me, “Troubles lies in fitting people to the same Procrustean bed. “

*Remember the Greek legend of Procrustes?*

Procrustes was a host who adjusted his guests to their bed. His name means “he who stretches.” Procrustes kept a house by the side of the road where he offered hospitality to passing strangers who were invited in for a pleasant meal and a night’s rest in his very special bed. Procrustes described it as having the unique property that its length exactly matched whomsoever lay down upon it. What he did not volunteer was the method by which the “one-size-fits-all” was achieved, namely as soon as the guest lay down Procrustes went to work upon him, stretching him on the rack if he was too short for the bed and chopping off his legs if he was too long. ([Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology](#))

Procrustes had a partiality for people all the same height. If they did not come that way, he made them into the right image.

The blessing we have is that God does not want us all to fit into the same mold. If we look around ourselves we can see that is true. God loves us where we are in life and who we are at each and every moment. He cherishes those dedicated as babies through infant baptism and those who come to God later in life as believers. In the final accounting, God shows no partiality—we are all weighed on the same scale and none are found wanting if we have undertaken a journey of the spirit that moves toward a greater and deeper understanding of our God. This is something that has been understood by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and that was grasped by Jesus as he struggled to help us see the light. Paul, although sometimes quite judgmental also knew that “there is no Greek nor Jew, no freeman or slave no male or female but all are the same” through Jesus and in the heart of God.

-- Amen