

Baptism 101
Isaiah 42:1-9;
Matthew 3:13-17
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 8, 2017

According to the Church calendar the gospel lesson for every second Sunday in January reports the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.

According to our tradition at Babcock Church, every second Sunday of January we ordain and install our new Church officers.

The story of Jesus' baptism prompts an explanation about what baptism is all about. Of course, a single sermon cannot even begin to cover all the implications of baptism.

Having said that, let's begin with this: baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sacred ritual described as being an outward visible sign of God's inward invisible grace. Whenever we participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper or baptism we are reminded that we worship a merciful God who desperately wants to be friends with us. What's more, this merciful God accepts us just as we are, warts and all.

Remembering Jesus's baptism and ordaining new elders today isn't a coincidence. There's a very real and mystical connection between the two.

Even so, even though most of us were baptized as infants and can't remember that day, we are still obligated to be faithful to our baptismal vows confirmed when we became adults.

In our reformed Christian tradition, ordination isn't a sacrament but it is a necessary ritual confirming a baptized believer's calling to a specialized ministry as a pastor, a ruling elder or a deacon.

Today we ordained two of our members to the office of ruling elder. Ruling elders are lay ministers called through the church to be the spiritual leaders of congregation. The ruling elder's primary responsibility is to be faithful to the baptismal vows.

There's a reason Presbyterians don't count ordination as a sacrament. The great reformer Martin Luther called baptism the believer's ordination to discipleship. In a very real sense, baptism is the Christian's ordination to be a minister of Christ. Ordination, on the other hand is what we call an ordinance, a practiced to confirm the believer's calling to particular ministry as a pastor, elder or deacon.

When adults are baptized they promise to accept Jesus Christ as their savior. Equally important, they promise to submit to his lordship, striving to keep the great commandment to love God, our neighbors and ourselves.

When infants are baptized, the same promises are made on their behalf. When they come of age, they will hopefully confirm these promises through the rite of confirmation.

Either way, baptism demands a response. The time comes for all of us to must make the decision to fully embrace our baptism by confirming our baptismal vows to enter into a covenant relationship with God.

The Hebrew word covenant is another word for a contract that can only be initiated by God. God already took the initiative to seek us out, promising to love us unconditionally. We, in turn, are encouraged to love God back with the understanding our love for God is conditional.

Because we're unable to love unconditionally, Jesus stepped in and mediated this new covenant by sacrificing himself for the forgiveness of our sins. His crucifixion made the way clear for us to experience friendship with God. Needless to say, when Christ died for us, we got the best of the bargain but at a great cost.

Last Sunday when we celebrated the sacrament of Holy Communion we heard Jesus say, "This is the new covenant in my blood." For all intents and purposes, when Jesus submitted to his baptism he was submitting to his ordination to be the suffering Messiah and die for the sins of the world.

You remember hearing that exchange between Jesus and John the Baptist on the banks of the River Jordan. Understandably, John tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized.

"I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?"

Jesus insisted, "Let be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

John's baptism was meant for the remission of our sins in preparation for the Messiah who takes away the sins of the world. You can understand John's reluctance to baptize Jesus. Only at Jesus' insistence, did John finally relent, even though he still didn't understand why Jesus needed to be baptized.

We find a clue for Jesus insistence when he said to John, "... it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus wasn't baptized for his salvation but for our salvation. In effect, we are baptized into Christ's passion. Through baptism, in some wonderful, mysterious, mystical way our sins are crucified or put to death with Jesus, the only one pure and innocent who could die for the sins of the world. By accepting his baptism, we acknowledge Christ as our Savior.

Something else happens when we submit to Christ's baptism. We get a new name and that name is Christian.

Smitty Lee was a Korean American who owned a tailor shop.

“Is Smitty a Korean name?” a customer asked.

“Oh no,” he replied, “it’s an American name. Smitty then told the story about an American soldier named Smitty Ransom who saved his life when he was a boy during the Korean War.

“Following Korean tradition,” Smitty concluded, “I took Smitty’s name because he saved my life.”

You see, by accepting the name Christian, you acknowledge Christ saved your life so you could be set apart to follow Christ in the servant lifestyle Jesus modeled during his ministry.

Not all of us are ordained to be pastors, elders or deacons but all of us are baptized to participate in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation.

Participating in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation means doing our part to bring the world back to God by simply showing up to live out God’s will on earth as it’s always being done in heaven.

That’s why Christ died for us. Get it out of your head you were saved just so you can get into heaven. You were saved to be a suffering servant leading others to Christ so they like you can experience God’s grace and pass it on to others.

And yes, ultimately you are saved for that final hour when Christs come again and brings heaven to earth in ways we could never even begin to imagine.

In the meantime, it’s necessary for serious Christians to be nurtured in the faith so we can realize our fullest potential as human beings created in God’s image.

To be sure, Christianity doesn’t come naturally. It only comes supernaturally. To be embraced by the supernatural we must decide to cooperate with God by following Jesus’ example and putting into practice a regular regimen of spiritual disciplines preparing us for the opportunities and challenges of the servant lifestyle. Like Jesus of Nazareth, we must learn how to allow God’s presence within us to take over and enhance our humanity.

We learn by being active and committed members of the beloved community. Very few of us can be lone rangers. We need solid relationships with other believers enriching our lives and fortifying our souls.

As members of the mystical body of Christ, you and I are given the privilege of sharing and bearing each others burdens. Being attentive to one another and nurturing one another enables us to become stronger in our faith and braver in our actions.

Bring in Christian community we can encourage one another to be the best we can be for God. Together we are given permission to be both weak and strong. Sometimes you find yourself in a vulnerable place in need of the strength and friendship of others to help you get

through the rough spots. Other times you find yourself strengthened by the Spirit so you can walk with the other through the valley of the shadow of death. Either way we show empathy and support to build each other up.

One more thing. God created us for intimacy. Without intimacy our humanity suffers. Seeking intimacy means being willing to drop your defenses and letting the other person in.

When you think about it, even Jesus needed spiritual friends. All four gospels report Jesus intentionally gathered a community of friends to support him in his ministry.

The gospels also tell us that initially more times than not Jesus' friends let him down. But after the false starts, the twelve disciples finally got with the program and learned how to be friends who sacrifice themselves in order to encourage and uphold each other. These first disciples were the spokes in the wheel with Jesus being Jesus the hub.

What was true then is certainly true now: we can pray for, love and support one another only because Christ is at the center of the beloved community, holding us together through the power of love.

Something else to consider, your baptism transforms you into becoming an authentic human being. The power of God liberates you from your constraints so you can become the real you. Your race, your social status, your talents and education are neither a bridge or a roadblock to attaining your fullest humanity. In the grand scheme of things, these cultural norms don't matter. What matters is knowing you belong to Christ. Through him are your sins forgiven and you receive empowerment to be agents of God's plan to bring justice and peace into the world.

Soon after I was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, I read an interview in the Baltimore Sun with the Catholic priest who worked in a soup kitchen.

The reporter asked, "Father, when did you decide to become a priest?"

I never forgot his answer, "I finally decided to become priest five years after my ordination."

That honest answer convicted me. I hope it convicts you too. Baptized disciples are not volunteers who come and go as they please. Baptized disciples are committed and disciplined to follow Christ where ever he takes us.

Christ was led by the Spirit to go into places he didn't want to go. And yet for our sakes and salvation, Jesus went anyway. His entire life was one sacrifice after another for the people his Father in heaven loved.

May Jesus' example, along with the example of the countless disciples who followed, inspire us to embrace our baptism into the mystery of Christ passion and resurrection to eternal life.