

Sermon "Recalling the Baptism of Jesus - A Reflection on Water, Spirit, Prayer, and Community"

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Scripture

Acts 8: 14-17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3: 15-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

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When my daughters were little, we went to Old Sturbridge Village during one summer vacation. We wandered around and listened to all the stories about life in the early New England. The girls played the games that children played in the 1700's – like rolling a hula hoop down the path by running alongside it and pushing it along with a stick. And then, as we were leaning on a fence to look at some horses with a lot of other people, I heard someone say something about Goldie Hawn. Well, across the field from us, leaning on different fence, was Goldie Hawn, wearing her hair pulled back, big sunglasses, a floppy hat that nearly hid her face. Next to her was her husband, Kurt Russell, wearing a baseball cap that almost covered his face. And with them were their 2 young children.

They did not want to stand out or be noticed. They were hanging out, like ordinary people. They wanted to be a part of that community of visitors, of tourists to that place, blending in with the crowd of people standing around that fence and looking at horses.

Well, in Luke's story of Jesus' baptism, Jesus has come to John to be baptized. Luke tells us that Jesus was in the Jordan with the other people who had come to be baptized by John. He went into that water with everyone else – with ordinary people and without fanfare. Consistent with his future of hanging out with ordinary people – with sinners, Jesus went into the water with the crowd to be baptized by John.

In fact in Luke's account, we cannot be sure that even John knows that it is Jesus. In Luke's account, John does not point to Jesus and identify him as the Messiah. And nothing spectacular happens while Jesus is coming up out of the water – unlike in Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism where a dove descends on him while he is coming out of the water. In Luke's gospel, it was after Jesus was baptized, while he was in prayer that the sky opened up “and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

After coming out of that water and entering into prayer, the Holy Spirit appeared and descended on Jesus. Jesus entered into the waters for his baptism. Then he entered into prayer. Then the Spirit descended on Jesus while he was in prayer. And the voice of God called Jesus “Beloved.” In that moment, in the time of prayer, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were unified. Their relationship of love was made visible. It was a relationship of the Beloved visible in that time of prayer.

But let's not forget that this baptism happened in community- in that water of the river, Jordan, with people who had come to the wilderness to be baptized by John. They had come to John to be cleansed of their sins and to be instructed in how they should live – to die to sin and be transformed. They were also hopeful, seeking the Messiah and wondering if John was that person. They were a community of hopeful believers.

And Jesus took his place among them. He shared that faith-filled activity. I believe that even Jesus sought the grace or blessing of baptism as he was to begin his ministry. He did not need to be cleansed of any sin. That's not why Jesus came to be baptized. Jesus, in his humanity, sought the waters of baptism and received affirmation of God's love and the blessing and guidance of the Spirit who would lead him into his wilderness and accompany him through his ministry. He sought baptism as part of a community connected by faith.

In our reading from Acts, Peter and John were with early Christians in Samaria. Those people had heard the story of Jesus from the apostle Philip. And they had seen him heal and cast out demons in Jesus' name. They wanted to be Jesus' followers. They wanted to be baptized. They

were even baptized in Jesus' name by Philip. Those new Christians had been baptized in Jesus' name but had not received the Holy Spirit. So Peter and John went to Samarian and laid their hands on those believers and called on the Spirit to descend upon them.

As a reminder, these people not Jews, but Samaritans. They had been enemies of the Jews and looked down upon by the Jews. So for Peter and John to baptize them meant that those early followers of Jesus who were Jewish needed to accept those whom they had considered unworthy. They had to accept them into their community, to accept them as brothers and sisters. As followers of Jesus, through their baptism, they all received the Holy Spirit. They all became part of that Christian community; called to follow Jesus, to be guided by the Spirit, to bear one another's burdens, and to fulfill Christ's law of love.

To this day, Christians continue to be baptized. Now, it's important that we remember that God's love for us begins before we are born. We do not need the Sacrament of Baptism for God to love us. When we are baptized we become members of a Christian community, followers of Christ within a community of faithful people committed to sharing their faith, teaching and loving in Jesus' name, and supporting one another as we share Jesus' message in the world. Together we share the cost and joy of discipleship.

The individual who is baptized, whether an adult or child, is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – into that relationship of love that is the Trinity. I wonder, whether we were baptized in this church or in a different denomination, do we give thought to what our baptism means. Regardless of the church of our baptism, there is no need to be baptized again if we change churches. But for today, I'd like to share the United Church of Christ's explanation of the baptism.

As you may recall, the United Church of Christ, recognizes two sacraments, Baptism and Communion. For the sacrament of Baptism, that recognition recalls Jesus' baptism, his call to baptize others and the invitation to become one with Christ and one another. (from the Preamble of the UCC Constitution)

I think that sometimes it is helpful to hear, to be reminded, and reflect upon what our baptism means. So I'd like to share these words from the UCC website on baptism.

“The sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. Through baptism a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ. In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always.”

“Through water at baptism, God embraces you — no matter who you are — and brings you into Christ’s Church. You become vital not only to a local church, but the wider Church. You share in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The church also promises to love, support, and care for you throughout your whole life. Baptized, you now participate fully in life of the Church and God’s realm.”

“Baptism with water and the Holy Spirit is the sign and seal of our common discipleship. Since baptism is God's gift, the Holy Spirit is called to be upon the water and those being baptized. The act of baptism also marks the beginning of new life of discipleship with Christ, the human response to that gift.”

“Water is an essential element of baptism. Water is a prominent symbol of cleansing and life in the Bible—the water of creation, the great flood, the liberation of Israel through the sea, the water of Mary's womb, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, the woman at the well, and Jesus' washing of the feet of the disciples. That is why water is visibly present in the service.”

“All our emphases seem to come together in the sacraments. Christ claims us, and we belong to Christ. God offers an extravagant welcome, and we share in it. God keeps covenant with us, and we unite as one with Christians throughout the world. God offers a vision of justice and love, and we are inspired to live it.”

Today we reflect on Jesus’ baptism and our own. Jesus’ entered the water of River Jordan with a community of believers, wanting to be baptized. While in prayer, he received the Holy Spirit, who would lead him into the wilderness and be with him throughout his live. And he heard God calling him Beloved.

As Christians, we receive the sacrament of baptism, blessed with a sprinkling of water or being immersed into water. We are connected through that element that has flowed through Creation since the beginning of time. And as Jesus received the Holy Spirit, we too receive the Spirit in our Baptism. Having heard the words that he was God’s beloved and being led by the Spirit, Jesus received reassurance of God’s love and presence as he went out into the world, going into the wilderness and then to go forward into his ministry to others.

Through our baptism, we hear the words that we are baptized in the “name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” As followers of Jesus, we too receive the Holy Spirit and are assured of God’s love. And we become part of a community of believers knowing that our amazing God calls us Beloved. But we are not called to keep that love to ourselves. We are called to bring that love into our world, as individuals and as members of the Christian church. We are led by the Spirit as we follow in the example of Jesus in living lives of justice, love and

hope. And we participate in that relationship through faith and prayer as we accept to our God's invitation of love.

So let us recall these words from this letter to the Galatians -

"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
—Galatians 3:26-28