

The Liturgy for June 14, 2020

The Question to be addressed: *Baptism has many forms. Why is that?*

~Thought for Meditation:

At least one of the purposes of church is to remind us that God has other children, easily as precious as we. Baptism and narcissism cancel each other out. Barbara Brown Taylor

~GATHERING :

I suppose in a way we are “going back in time,” to Jesus’ departure at the Ascension. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus gives the disciples some “marching orders’ if you will. He knows this crew inside out, for good and ill, and loves them just the same. More. And he knows they need a word. A word of love and communion and care before he leaves this old world, and them. Again. And here’s the thing: he doesn’t chastise them for their mistakes or give them a pep talk, or give the goods on how to grow a church in 6 easy steps. He gives them something solid to do. He told them to go and baptize. Even gave them a formula to use. And he ends with a blessing – the best ending of all.

~LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE

~CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: The joy of Christ be with you!

People: And also with you!

Leader: Let’s worship together!

~OPENING PRAYER ENDING WITH THE LORD’S PRAYER

We come into your presence, O God, with water and word. We come as your people, named and claimed as your own. Hear us now, as together we pray the words of Jesus, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,**

**For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.**

~Scripture: Matthew 28: 16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

~Reflection: *Baptism Deconstructed*

In our tradition, the United Church of Canada, we have 2 sacraments:

Baptism and Communion. While Roman Catholics observe 7 sacraments (confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders, marriage) we, like many Protestant denominations, subscribe only to the “dominical sacraments” the ones instituted by Jesus (*dominus* is Latin for “The Lord.”). In the Upper Room, at his last supper with the disciples, Jesus breaks bread and shares a cup and says “*Do* this, in remembrance of me.” And in today’s scripture he says “*Go* and make disciples baptizing them....” *Go. Do.*

These are the dominical sacraments.

What Jesus does not do, is give us much detail as to the “how” of baptism. But this hasn’t stopped the church over the centuries from devising sacramental rites.

Baptism scripturally:

Jesus, famously, gets baptized, by his cousin John in the Jordan River. This was not a new thing though. This was a tradition in Judaism for the cleansing of sins. So it both makes sense for Jesus, being a faithful Jew-and it also confounds ...for why would this one who was “of God and *was* God,” need cleansing from sin? That has kept theologians busy for ever. But if

there was any question as to how right it was, the story in all 4 gospels, tells us that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove, and the voice of God speaks, saying: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And Jesus emerges from the water and begins his public ministry. What that ministry *never* includes, as far as we know, is baptizing,

despite John’s assertion that Jesus would be the one to baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit!

But Jesus does tell his disciples to baptize, and in the Book of Acts, which is about the early community of the followers of Jesus (after his ascension) we hear of baptism happening...but again, no details.

Water

We learn more from the Apostolic tradition, which was laid out in a book called *The Didache* (the Teachings of the Disciples). This is the earliest writings we have of the Early Church, a sort of Manual of procedure for worship and the sacraments. And the Didache says Baptism requires water. Lots of water: the norm was immersion, getting completely dunked. Water was the sign of God’s saving grace, so the more the better. It also stated that the preference is for living water: i.e., a river. If not, then another body of water (lake/pond) would suffice, but that it ought to be cold. But lukewarm would do. And if you could not actually immerse, then you could pour it 3 times over the person. If you look at early Christian art depicting baptism, you will often see a person standing in water, but not immersed, and the water being poured over their head from a shell.

So you can see that even in the early days, variations were developing. Is it any surprise that there are many ways to be baptized?

Baptists and other Fundamentalists: They insist on full immersion, hence the baptismal pool in their sanctuaries. Or they may have outdoor baptisms in a river or lake or creek. In these traditions they are only dunked under the water once. (Eastern Orthodox do three.)

Mainline Churches: We proceed with pouring water over the head of the individual from a baptismal font. I like to use a lot: a full pitcher to pour (I enlist older siblings to help pour the water into the font for their little sister or brother's baptism). The audible sounds and sight of water, flowing and splashing and reflecting light are a good sign of God's grace in the ordinary gift of water. But when this cannot be, such as when we are called to baptize an infant in critical health, the tiniest drop of water from a sterile gloved hand is just as holy.

The three scoops/Triune formula We use 3 handfuls (or drops) of water because of today's scripture. Over time we have understood/adopted the words from Matthew's gospel as a Baptismal formula: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I will note here, that when we hear of the disciples baptizing in the Book of Acts, they don't use this formula! They use only "in the name of Jesus Christ."

I always use the triune formula. And that's because of the BEM document: An agreement reached by the World Council of Churches on Baptism/Eucharist/Ministry. It states that we will accept one another's baptisms when this formula is used. This was such a huge step forward in terms of building up the beloved community instead of dividing us. The way it works: Perhaps you were raised Anglican, but are marrying and wish to become a member of your partner's church which is United. Your baptism is full accepted. You are United and want to become Roman Catholic. Your baptism will be accepted.

Now, if we decided to become Baptist, our Baptism would NOT be accepted. Partly because they insist on full immersion. But it also has to do with AGE.

The Question of Baptizing Infants:

This is an old, old debate. For some, like our Baptist kin, the answer is no. They believe that you must be able to articulate your faith; make your own claim of belief and why you wish to be baptized.

For most of the mainline traditions, including our United Church, we say Yes. Because Baptism is not a work on our part. It is only God's. Baptism is that outward sign of God's love and grace poured out upon us. There is nothing we can do to earn it, therefore it is open to all.

Historically:

Historically, infants seemed to have often been baptized. In the Book of Acts we hear statements like: "And the whole household was baptized." Somewhere between the 1st and 3rd Centuries infant baptisms fell off, with a turn toward a very intense and involved 3 year baptismal process for adults. It required intensive study; mentors; exams; and fasting. The actual Baptism was held on Easter vigil, the night before Easter. It was very elaborate with special white garments and the consumption of milk and honey after.

Tertullien, who wrote on such matters at the end of the 2nd C, noted that while the custom was often to have infants baptized with a "sponsor" or adult speaking on their behalf, he recommended that they wait for adulthood. But note: Tertullian specifically believed that infants and children did not need baptism, as they were "innocents." Ahh, but by the 3rd C, Augustine was expounding his theology of Original sin (that we are all born in a sinful, fallen state). Combine this with high infant mortality of the time and infant baptism came to the fore again, to ensure their salvation.

In our tradition we do not believe Baptism to be necessary for salvation. Baptism is the outward sign of something that already exists: God created in love and calls creation good.

Jesus did not say or do anything at his baptism. It was all a matter of God claiming him as his Beloved. Paul Tillich says “Salvation is simply accepting the fact that we have already been accepted.”

As you can see, there is no one and only way to Baptize. Something that has caused some ruffles in more recent times is where a child is baptized. A family may attend a church in a particular city. But when they want their child baptized they may wish to travel back to a home city where many relatives reside; to a family church where traditionally they are all baptized. The argumentative may say that the child should be baptized in the church where they will be part and parcel of every week. And part of the argument is based around promises made. Not by the family. But by the church community. In Roman Catholic circles godparents are part of the ritual, promising to support and pray for the family, and helping to encourage the spiritual growth of the child. In the United Church tradition (among others), we have the whole church community take on these promises. So, some will argue that they don't feel able to say those promises if the child will be raised in a church in another city or province. All I can say to that concern is: “I plant and Appollos waters.” We are a wider community than this. The pathway of the Baptized will wind and wander but ultimately it leads home to the One who names and claims us all and each as Beloved.

After Baptism, as I take the child and present her to her new extended family, I say:

Look here: these are your people. And you are part of our family. With this act of baptism we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. What God will make of you, we do not know. Where God will take you, or

how God will surprise you, we cannot be sure. This we do know. And this is my blessing, and my promise to you – You are beloved of God who will be with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.

~A Time of Prayer: (This is based on a prayer I say in Baptismal liturgy)
We give you thanks, O God, for the gift of creation made known to us in water and word. Before the world had shape and form, your Spirit moved over the waters.

May your Spirit move among us now.

Out of the waters of the deep you formed the firmament and brought forth the earth to sustain all life.

Help us to take care of this life you have entrusted to us.

In the time of Moses your people Israel passed through the Red Sea waters from slavery to freedom, and crossed the flowing Jordan to enter the Promised Land.

Help us to acknowledge the actions that still enslave people, and let us work to make right relations.

You have come to us through water in the stories of Jesus, who was nurtured in the water of Mary's womb, baptized by John in the Jordan, and became Living Water to a woman at the Samaritan well. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and sent them forth to baptize with water and the Spirit.

By your Holy Spirit O God, bless us. May we be a sign to all the world of new life in Christ. Amen.

~Benediction: