

A SERMON PREACHED ON JANUARY 13, 2019, AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,  
BETHANY BEACH, DE

Due to the way the calendar presents itself in 2019, it seems as though we have been rushed through the Christmas season, liturgically speaking. We barely have had a moment to tell the Christmas story and we're already well into Epiphany. We've not had time to take down the decorations, nor once more look through all the cards we received to see to whom we might owe a message. Folks have already broken their new year's resolutions, and we're only 2 weeks into 2019. Yet here we are at the day known as The Baptism of Christ.

The messages chosen for this morning's Scripture readings come from two very different times in the life of Jesus and his disciples. The first, from *Acts of the Apostles*, speaks of the how the Holy Spirit came upon the people whom Paul baptizes in Ephesus; the second, from the *Gospel of Luke* tells of Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist at the River Jordan, which is seen as the beginning of his earthly ministry. Both readings pick up a theme from *Genesis*, that as God's beloved children, we participate in the re-creation of the world in the image of God's vision of justice and peace through the workings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>i</sup>

The Holy Spirit is a funny entity, you know. One never is quite sure when it might show up, and where. There is an old saw about ornery teenager Johnny who went to church and was baptized and immersed in the water three times. At the 3rd time the Pastor said: "You are now baptized. You are a new creation, the old one is gone. No more drinking of alcohol for you. Your new name is Jacob."

Jacob went back home and headed straight for the fridge. He took a Heineken dipped it in water 3 times and said: "You are now a new creation, the old one is gone. Your new name is Orange Juice!!!"<sup>ii</sup> I'm sure that it has crossed someone's mind at some time, though not mine. I've probably baptized about 75 folks in my life, from very young infants to older adults (as of yet, none at the time of death, although I fully expect that I might be called upon to do so some day...). I've baptized three folks in the ocean amidst gentle rolling waves, one at a office water cooler, one in the middle of a lake on a small island, but the rest have been pretty traditional at the front or entryway to a church at a small fount, as is the Episcopal Church tradition. I'm proud to be one of the trillions of men, women, and children who have shared this rite. Indeed, The Disciples of Christ hold it as a tenet of their faith that full members be baptized.

All this talk about baptism leads me to think about my own. I certainly don't remember it, as I was a child of about 40 days old, the age when children were presented to the temple in Judaism. How many of you were baptized as infants? As adults? I wonder if we've ever stopped to ponder how the Holy Spirit interacted with us on that occasion. Because, you see, Jesus' baptism was not just a water baptism. That was the kind of baptism John was offering at the Jordan. The baptism John the Baptist performed was called *Tvilah*, which was a Jewish purification ritual of immersing in water, that is required for, among other

things, conversion to Judaism, but which differs in being repeatable; while baptism, the church tells us, is to be performed only once. Interestingly, Jesus did not ever baptize anyone in Scripture, so it is fascinating indeed that this is seen as such an important ritual of worship in most Christian congregations. In the Disciples tradition and ways of worship, baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With other Christians we affirm that baptism is at once a divine gift and a human response. It signifies new birth, a cleansing from sin, the individual's response to God's grace, and acceptance into the faith community.<sup>iii</sup> It is therefore multi-functional, and is linked more to the resurrection experience than it is to entry or membership in a church. As such, according to the Disciples of Christ national website the meaning of baptism is (quote) "grounded in God's redemptive action in Christ, it incorporates the believer in the community in the body of Christ, and it anticipates life in the coming age when the powers of the old world will be overcome, and the purposes of God will triumph." (unquote)<sup>iv</sup> However, in typical Disciples tradition, these definitions that offer a wide variety of viewpoints about everything are held by a whole host of differing believers when it comes to church doctrine. I say this in full recognition that not everyone might agree with how I present baptism to you this morning, but it does seem to me to be linked in Disciples' doctrine to cleansing of sin on the one hand and on resurrection on other. Since I am probably closer to death than I am to the years I've put in since birth, I am certainly interested in the after-death portion, and how it is, that in baptism, we are linked to Christ's death and resurrection.

This reminds me of a bit of humor regarding children's understanding about what the church does. One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Alex staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The plaque was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside him and said quietly, "Good morning, Alex."

"Good morning, Pastor," replied the young man, still focused on the plaque. "Pastor McGhee, what is this?" Alex asked.

"Well, son, it's a memorial to all the men and women who have died in the service."

Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque. Little Alex's voice was barely audible when he finally managed to ask, "Which one, the 9:00 or 10:30 service?"<sup>v</sup>

It seems that even little Alex understood that "the resurrection has always been the pivot point of the Gospel. The teaching of the resurrection was relentlessly the main thrust of the message that the apostles proclaimed to the world. The Apostle Paul tells us without the resurrection, we are still dead in our sins. It was Christ's resurrection from the dead that was His ultimate triumph over Satan. The resurrection of Jesus Christ proves that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has the power to save us from our separation from God.

In *The Letter to the Romans* Paul teaches "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory

of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” So, it is obvious that one cannot teach baptism correctly without teaching that Jesus rose from the dead. It is through baptism that we become united with Christ in His death and consequently also in his resurrection. To reject baptism is to personally reject the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And to reject the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to reject Him as the Son of God. Therefore, if we deny baptism, we deny Christ from raising us from death.<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps that does not concern any one sitting here. But many who have gone before us have found it essential. So despite the fact that this is pretty ‘dry stuff,’ as they say, I don’t think I’m going to be denying my baptism anytime soon! It appears to be the link between heaven and earth, and perhaps an entryway into the kingdom nowadays here. Who knew it should be taken as being of such great importance? Now we know why so many churches hold it in such high favor and esteem. **It unlocks everything!**

Again, I will say that not everyone sees baptism the way I do, but that is the joy of attending a Disciples church. I’m reminded of the story of the father who is in church with three of his young children, including his five year-old daughter. As was customary, he sat in the very front row so that the children could properly witness the service. During this particular service, the minister was performing the baptism of a tiny infant. The little five year old girl was taken by this, observing that he was saying something and pouring water over the infant's head. With a quizzical look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked: "Daddy, why is he brainwashing that baby??"<sup>vii</sup>

I’m sure some folks think that is what we are up to when we baptize, but I see it as an investment for what is and is to come. So I challenge us to oft pray this little ditty: “come water, come Spirit, come God, Be in it.” And may we be blessed therefore by God’s presence with us and always.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.  
Pastor, BBCC

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<sup>i</sup> *Sundays and Seasons, Year 2018*, p. 72

<sup>ii</sup> [lolpal.com/johnnys-baptism-humor-831](http://lolpal.com/johnnys-baptism-humor-831)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/disciples-of-christ-beliefs-and-practices-700019>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://disciples.org/our-identity/communion-and-baptism/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/resources/sermon-helps/jokes-for-sermons/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.bebaptized.org/TheResurrection.htm>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Baptism>