

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Before performing a baptism, the priest approached the young father and said solemnly, "Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?"

"I think so," the man replied. "My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all of our guests."

"I don't mean that," the priest responded. "I mean, are you prepared spiritually?"

"Well I certainly think so," came the reply. "I've got a keg of beer and a case of whiskey."<sup>i</sup>

Due to the way the calendar presents itself in 2018, with Monday being the first day of the month, as well as the first day of the year, 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 in Epiphany. We've not had time to take down the decorations, nor once more look through all the cards we received to see who we might owe a message to. Folks have already broken their new year's resolutions, and we're only 7 days into 2018.

The messages from 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 Paul baptizes in Ephesus; the second, from the *Gospel of Mark* 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>ii</sup>

The Holy Spirit is a funny entity, you know. One never is quite sure when it might show up, and where. 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...). My strangest request came from a co-worker in an office setting who was quite insistent that I baptize him there and then. It was my first and only time that I performed a baptism at a water cooler. My most unusual request came from a sixty-some year old Jewish woman whose wedding I had performed 14 years earlier. She was marrying the brother of my former congregation's secretary, and I had known them well. She had the unfortunate experience of losing her mother and her only daughter three weeks apart; she was very close to both of them. Though Jewish, they were not particularly religious, so after both had been cremated, she asked that I perform their funerals/memorial services on the same day at different locations: one was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery, the other's cremains were to go with her husband back to Denmark. As you might imagine, it was an emotional day,

and I was called upon often for solace and emotional support. When all was over from a long day, the grieving mother/daughter told me how much my words and perspective had meant, and she asked if I would consider speaking to her more about Christianity. Thus began a long e-mail correspondence, the long and short of which was that she asked if I would baptize her, that it would mean a lot. So on the Sunday after Easter Sunday of last year, we met and went into the ocean in front of 99 Sea Level, and I baptized her, wet hair and clothes and all, with her husband and Anthony in attendance. It completed one journey she had long been on, and started a whole other. This past year she celebrated her first Christmas as a Christian, and it meant a lot to her. She was so excited, as if she were a kid. To me, it just shows where the Spirit can lead us, if we are indeed open to it.

Of course 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. How many of you were baptized as infants? As adults? I wonder if we've ever stop to ponder how the Holy Spirit interacted with us on that occasion. Because, you see, it was not just a water baptism. That was the kind of baptism John was offering at the Jordan. It 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, so it is fascinating indeed that it is the central tenet of worship for 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, the meaning of baptism is 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.<sup>iv</sup> These definitions are taken from the Disciples of Christ national website. However, in typical Disciples tradition, a wide variety of viewpoints about everything is 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.

"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 sins.

*The Letter to the Romans* [6:3-5] teaches us "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." 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>v</sup> 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 here nowadays. 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!

I've had some experiences with baptism in just this way. Years ago in my ministry in Hartsdale, New York, I was approached by a group of Japanese women who wanted to learn to speak English. We agreed that our text would be the bible, and we started out in Year One with about ten students. Over the years the class grew till we had about twenty regular attendees. Some of the women became curious and started to attend our Sunday services. When we read in the gospels stories about baptism, I had several of the women asked if I would baptize them "secretly." They said if their husbands found out about it they would be angry; it might cause them to be ostracized at work, or at worst, fired. I had to pray a long time about what to do, but I decided that I was being led by the Spirit to participate in this moment with the Japanese community in my midst, and I agreed to do so. The women were very happy, but some of their husbands found out what had happened and were quite angry, forbidding some students to return. They did, anyway, and for the first time I came to understand the Scripture from the *Gospel of Matthew* that says "Brother shall go up against brother, and ....You will be hated by everyone on account of My name; but the one who perseveres to the end will be saved...."

In the group there were still others who were not baptized who started to come up to take communion. They brought their friends also. One of my clergy colleagues reported this to the bishop, and I received a reprimanding call for giving communion to un-baptized persons. I explained to my bishop that I could not tell who was baptized and who was not; after all, there was no sign on their head, no mark on their forehead as they came forward. I told the bishop that I felt strongly that if the Spirit were moving folks to take communion and participate in the life of the church, we should get out of the way and allow the Spirit to do its work. He hung up on me, but there was no further discussion of it. The good news is that those women who did get baptized have started study groups all over Japan and throughout the U.S.; in fact, one of my students, Kyoko Kageyama, became the first woman to graduate from a Japanese seminary;

she is running a ministry called Metropolitan Japanese Ministry in Scarsdale, NY to this day. It just goes to show us that baptism as an entry rite into the church can have great meaning and long lasting staying power.

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 whos 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>vi</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. As I always pray, "come water, come Spirit, come God, Be in it."

Amen.

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

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

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

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