

Understanding Christian Baptism

January 12, 2014

Matthew 3:13-17

This Sunday in the Christian calendar is designated the Baptism of the Lord. It generally follows the two Sundays of Christmastide, or as some denominations label it, the Sundays after Christmas Day.

In our Monday morning men's fellowship we've been studying Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. We recently had a session on Luther and the controversy over infant baptism.

So I thought it might be appropriate, on this day designated to observe the baptism of the Lord, to consider our understanding of baptism, one of the two sacraments of our church and one that I feel is perhaps not fully understood by many.

In our gospel lesson this morning we read about Jesus' baptism as an adult. This baptism was the beginning of his official ministry, sort of his inauguration or commissioning as it were.

John was baptizing people at the Jordan River as a symbol of washing away their sins. This was not Christian baptism; John baptized people for repentance and forgiveness.

These baptisms had been happening for a while; Jesus was not the first to come. But perhaps Jesus was the most notable baptism that John performed.

We don't know exactly what it looked like, but there was probably a little more water used than that which is in our baptismal font. In fact, the Greek word, "baptizo" literally does mean going down into the water.

Let me emphasize here that we don't need to worry about the "how" of Jesus' baptism.

We know that some denominations believe in total immersion as the only acceptable method of baptism.

Verse 16 is interpreted by Baptists, for example, to mean Jesus was baptized by total immersion, which may be how it happened.

Other interpretations say that maybe Jesus was standing waist deep in the water, was sprinkled, and then walked up to shore "out of" or "from" the water.

We, as Presbyterians, believe the latter interpretation, although we will baptize by immersion if someone requests it. The "how" of baptism really is not the critical issue.

John insisted that it wasn't right for him to be baptizing Jesus; he could already tell that something was different about him.

Certainly Jesus should be the one doing the baptizing. But Jesus convinced John that it needed to be this way.

In Matthew's account, which I read today, when John had baptized Jesus, just as he came out of the water, there were signs that confirmed Jesus' mission:

the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, the heavens opening, and a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Mark and Luke also mention the baptism of Jesus, although Mark devotes only three verses to it, and Luke even less, only 2 verses.

But something very interesting – Biblical scholars have found that Luke originally contained the words from God, "you are my son, this day have I begotten you." – words also found in Psalm 2:7, Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5.

This has led many to the conclusion that it was at his baptism that Jesus actually became the Messiah, not at his birth.

It is a fascinating idea that we won't pursue this morning.

But even without that, Jesus' baptism leads us into all sorts of questions about baptism. For example, if Jesus was baptized as an adult, why do we baptize infants?

We might say that if it were good enough for the Messiah, then it's certainly good enough for us.

But the difference is the emphasis. If we were to say that people had to wait to be baptized until they could fully believe for themselves, then it puts too much focus on the individual's actions.

The act of baptism is about a pure gracious gift of God, not about an individual's faith.

Obviously adults who have never been baptized will probably come to faith first, and then be baptized (otherwise they wouldn't ask to be baptized).

But if we are to restrict baptism only to those who fully believe, it puts too much emphasis on the person, on what I bring to the baptismal font, on who I am and how prepared I have become, rather than focusing on the gracious gift of God given at baptism.

We baptize infants and children because it symbolizes the pure, grace-filled, unconditional love and promise of God granted at baptism.

It's not as if adult baptisms mean less, but the thought of a helpless infant receiving the same promise of love and grace as someone who has read the Bible - forward and back three times - points to the true meaning of baptism.

At the deepest level, baptism has to do with a grace we receive as a divine gift. It is God's action, God's activity, not ours.

Baptism is an unmerited gift of grace, not something we can believe hard enough or work our way into being worthy of.

Unfortunately, we in the mainline church have taken the doctrine of infant baptism and gone off the deep end with it - so to speak.

We have so emphasized infant baptism that many people have their children baptized as a sort of holy fire insurance.

They don't worry about what faith instruction follows, as long as the child has been baptized.

Over my years in ministry I've had people call to ask me about having their babies "christened" or "done." They meant, of course, baptized.

"Having my baby done" is a crass way of speaking about what should be the stepping off point into a life of faith.

When we were baptized, we did not take out a divine insurance policy that guarantees us a reserved pew in heaven. Baptism is not a magic skeleton key that automatically ushers us into the courts of heaven.

Our baptisms should lead us into a life of loving service to God and one another. We are baptized into a community of faith, and sent into God's mission.

Baptism is not the ending point, but the beginning point of faith and our calling by God.

Instead of initiating us into a clubhouse, baptism draws us into a lighthouse where we are the lights that shine forth.

Although the promises of God don't change because we turn away, the future of our relationship with God is not automatically guaranteed by our baptism.

In our baptism, God establishes a new relationship with us. Though the love for us may already be there, somehow God's connection to us is deepened through baptism.

We are invited and empowered to live within that baptism relationship.

And yet, God still leaves us the capacity to try to live outside of it. It's the catch-22 of free will, something else we're talking about in our men's group.

We are free to follow, but we are also free to stray. God's promises to us are real. They take no achievement or accomplishment on our part; hence we baptize infants and children.

Our baptismal certificate is not "Congratulations on a job well done", but an invitation into a deeper relationship with the One who brings us life.

The promise of God, not our own power to believe or achieve, is the real power undergirding the act of baptism.

A woman in a discussion group I was involved in had been struggling with her adult son - I'll call him Phil. Phil had problems.

He called his mother frequently asking for money, yet he would not accept the help she was willing to offer. He tried everything he could to distance himself from her, rejecting whatever help she offered.

Phil found it extraordinarily hard to respond to her love. He hurt her with his words and actions, taking advantage of her when she tried to help.

Because he was of legal age, he could turn away from her love. He could decide to reject the love that she wanted to offer. In fact he hurt her so badly that at times she did not want to love him back. But he could never truly keep her from loving him.

It is the same freedom that God has given us: the freedom to reject God's love, the freedom to refuse that unmerited grace God offers.

Although Phil could make it hard for his mother to love him, the one thing that Phil could not do is make his mother stop loving him.

Though she may have gotten so mad that she didn't even want to return her son's phone calls, because of her commitment to him, he couldn't remove that relationship no matter how hard he tried.

In a similar way, we will at times let God down. In the process of trying to live out our baptismal calling, we will hurt others or ourselves.

We will not live within harmony with the desires of God. There will be sin; there will be breaks in the relationship that feel like they will never mend.

We can turn from God, push God away, fight with God, struggle against every attempt God makes to reach us, and deny that God is even present. But the one thing that we cannot do is make God stop loving us.

God continuously hopes for our reconciliation, even when we try to run the other way, because at our baptism, God promises to love us and to be our God. God continually turns in love toward us, reaching out even when we aren't willing to see it.

The promises of God at baptism are real. Whatever pain or sin we might perpetuate in this life, however we hurt ourselves or our neighbor, we cannot make God stop loving us.

We may turn from God's love by our actions or our attitudes, but God does not turn away from us.

Seek the mission that God calls you to through your baptism. Live within the relationship that God has created with you in your baptism.

Learn about the calling that God brought into your life when you were baptized. And may all of us know and respond to the love and grace of God that is offered through our baptisms, so that we may find healing and hope.