

May 20, 2018

The Sacraments

*Why is Baptism So Important?*

Matthew 3:13-17, 2 Timothy 1:3-7

**Opening words:** Saint Augustine once said, "*A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace.*" Many believers view the sacraments as a visible symbol of the reality of God, as well as a means by which God enacts his grace. Both the Roman Catholic tradition and the Orthodox tradition recognize seven sacraments: Baptism, Confession, Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, and Anointing the Sick. Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, identify only two sacraments instituted by Christ: Communion and Baptism. Today, we look at baptism.

History tells us King Aengus was baptized by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. The Saint asked, "Why did you suffer this pain in silence?" The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual." His understanding of baptism came up a little short. This is my question for you today: Do you understand the full meaning of Christian baptism? This message is designed to help you answer that question. Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 3:13-17. Let me call this message *Why is Baptism So Important?*

**Matthew 3:13-17** <sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

<sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

**2 Timothy 1:3-7** <sup>3</sup> I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. <sup>4</sup> Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. <sup>5</sup> I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. <sup>6</sup> For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. <sup>7</sup> For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

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Pope Francis once said, *"We are called to live our baptism every day, as new creatures, clothed in Christ."* I like that quote because it is true. If you like that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the third chapter of Matthew. As the story begins, all eyes are on the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, John the Baptist. His message is clear, *"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near!"* To show their repentance was sincere, John called them to a remote place to be baptized. We call the baptism John practiced "immersion". It has also been called a sinner's baptism. Many sinners responded to his calling and left the city and went into the wilderness to be baptized. The symbolism was clear. In baptism, your sins were being washed away. One of those individuals who responded to John's calling was Jesus. This is where the story gets complex. Jesus never sinned, so why would he need a sinner's baptism? I don't have the answer to that question, but I do know Jesus' baptism signaled the beginning of his earthly ministry. Things would never be the same again.

The early church wanted to be like Jesus, so they baptized new converts. At first, everyone was baptized on Easter morning. Men baptized men, and women baptized women. Everyone was baptized in their birthday suit. Those who were being baptized wore black robes to symbolize their sinfulness. Once baptized, they were given white robes to symbolize their purity. The black robes were returned a week later, because they had already sinned again. Later, the symbolism of baptism changed. When you were held under the water, you were dying with Christ. When you were pulled out of the water, you were being resurrected with Christ. The early church saw baptism as an adoption into the Christian faith. How many of you were baptized by immersion? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

During the summer of 2013, Kathryn and I were in Ukraine. We look forward to returning this summer. Our host in 2013 was Patrick Whaley, who was planning a baptismal service. Everywhere we went, he encouraged people to come, and he encouraged some to be baptized. I don't know how else to say it. Many of the Ukrainian people we met were spiritually confused. Their history explains why. For seventy years, their country was part of the Soviet Union, so there is a communist hangover. Some believed like the communists. They believed in nothing. Many Ukrainians professed to be Orthodox, but they did not practice the faith. To muddy the water more, some cults, like Mormonism, had come to their land with their bad theology. The Protestants, like Methodism, were lumped together and lacked influence. Patrick's baptism service was important because he was simply trying to lead the people back to their Christian core. He was not promoting the United Methodist Church. He was simply promoting Jesus! The Master is the real meaning of any form of baptism. Without Jesus, there is no need to baptize. If you find Jesus to be an important part of baptism, say, **"Amen!"**

Church history tells us a simple sad truth: Life is hard. During the Dark Ages, baptism itself changed. You know it is true. Moms and dads have always loved their children.

During the Dark Ages, the infant mortality rate was extremely high. Parents were afraid their children wouldn't make it into heaven without baptism, so they ran their newborns to the church to be baptized, just in case the unthinkable happened. Their desire was to wash away the original sin from Adam, so they could enter eternal peace. The practice caught on, and today, most of western churches practice infant baptism. That is why we practice infant baptism. How many of you were baptized as an infant? How many of you have had your children baptized as infants? Has anyone here ever participated or witnessed a baptism by pouring? Today, I am going to answer this question:

**Why is infant baptism so important?** I have picked infant baptism because that is the form of baptism we practice as United Methodists. Generally speaking, we do two things. First, we wash away the original sin of Adam. Within each newborn is a flaw that leads them to sin. Second, we recognize the importance of environment. Children are not born into isolation. They are born into communities. Part of that community is family. Part of that community is the church. Both of those thoughts are found in the *United Methodist Book of Worship*. Never forget it. The truth is, infant baptism doesn't last just a few moments on a certain day. Infant baptism is not an event; infant baptism is a beginning of a journey that lasts for years. If you are ready to unpack our liturgy, say, **"Amen!"**

**Infant baptism is important because it deals with the faith itself!** Look at the Gospel lesson with me for today. John is in the wilderness baptizing people in the Jordan. There must have been a sea of sinful faces, which is why one sinless face stuck out. It was the face of his perfect cousin, Jesus. John believed in Jesus from the very beginning. John knew his place in world history was secondary to Jesus' place. It is for this reason he is uncomfortable baptizing Jesus. Yet, Jesus is determined to be baptized. When Jesus is baptized, something wonderful happens. God Himself suddenly appears. God says in verse 17, *"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* In other words, God is endorsing Jesus as the Messiah. For the Jews, it meant the wait was over. The Messiah had finally arrived. To us it means more. It means that Jesus was the most unique life that ever lived. He was the very incarnation of God, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is our only hope of salvation. Baptism reminds us that Christianity is the one true faith! By your presence here today I am assuming you believe Christianity is the one true faith. If you believe Christianity is the one true faith, say, **"Amen!"**

**Infant baptism is important because it involves family!** Look at the epistle lesson for today. The Apostle Paul is writing this letter to a young pastor by the name of Timothy. He is giving him some pastoral advice. Paul is not writing to a stranger. He is writing to someone he knew well. He knew Timothy's personal story, and he knew his family. He knew his grandmother Lois, and he knew his mother Eunice. He knew of their faith and he knew they placed their faith in Jesus in him. I do not know how much Paul knew about family dynamics, but I do know this: Paul knew the greatest influence

on Timothy's life was his family. The greatest influence on your life is your family. The greatest influence on the child being baptized is his or her family.

That is why in the ritual we ask the parents of the baby these questions:

**Beloved, do you in presenting this child for holy Baptism confess your faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?**

**Do you therefore accept your duty and privilege to live before this child a life that becomes the Gospel; to exercise all godly care that he be brought up in the Christian faith, that he be taught the Holy Scriptures, and that he may learn to give the reverent attendance upon the private and public worship of God?**

**Will you endeavor to keep the child under the ministry and guidance of the church?**

The parents always say, "We do" or "We will." However, on the day the parents answer, "No!" the baptism is over. Infant baptism means nothing if the faith means nothing to the parents. Let me ask you this question: how important is the faith to you? If you want your child to take the faith seriously, then you must take the faith seriously. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" In infant baptism we are admitting Christianity is the one true faith. In infant baptism the family is promising to be a holy model of Christian living.

**Infant baptism is important because it involves the fellowship!** There comes a point in the baptism ritual that the attention leaves the baby and the parents. It falls on the church. It is now the church's turn to make the promise. How many times have you recited these words?

**With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to eternal life.**

Don't just read the words, look at the meaning. The church is promising to create a Christian environment to influence the child toward salvation. That is why Vacation Bible School is so important. That is why Sunday school is so important. That is why the annual mission trip is so important. That is why Junior Church is so important. God has entrusted these young souls to us, so we must be at our best. There is more to life than teamwork. There is salvation. How could you enjoy the riches of heaven if one of these precious souls was missing? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" This is the truth: We can have the best Christian Education program in the history of the church, but if the parents don't give us the opportunity to work with their young, then it means nothing!

Several years ago, I had the privilege of baptizing a little girl by the name of Lucy. Baptisms are great for a variety of reasons. First, baptisms are great because they bring people to the church. It is not fun preaching to a half empty room. The more, the merrier. Second, baptisms are great because they remind us of the goodness in younger generations. Sometimes we fail to see the goodness in other generations. Church is the last place where all the generations mix. Third and finally, baptisms are great because we get to see a baby. How often do you get to see a baby? That is why I walk around with the baby. During those few sacred moments the spotlight rested squarely on Lucy. It was a nice moment for the entire family and parents. It was a nice moment for the church. After the benediction, I stood at the back of the church. Someone mentioned Lucy's baptism. He said, "It was a nice baptism. I was sorry when it ended." The person was wrong! The baptism wasn't over, it was just beginning! The real work begins after the water dries. Do you remember the words of Pope Francis? He said, *"We are called to live our baptism every day, as new creatures, clothed in Christ."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

