

9 January 2021

Too Much of Water Hast Thou

Mark 1:4-11

Today, in the church calendar, is the day we remember the baptism of Our Lord. We read Mark's account of that from chapter 1, verses 4-11.

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The passage you just heard describes John's baptism of Jesus, and which inaugurated an important part of Christian worship that we still do today. Since this is something that almost all Christians do, and often do differently, I thought today, with your permission, before I begin my actual sermon, I'd take just a brief moment to explain what baptism means. So, just bear with me for a second.

Well, actually, since there are different understandings of baptism, I might have to take *two* seconds, but we'll be brief. There are, basically, two approaches to baptism: the sacramental and the non-sacramental. Now those who talk about the *sacramental* nature of baptism stress that it is a *means* of grace, that in the sacrament of baptism something actually happens through the action of God. In the waters of baptism, God and God alone imparts grace and power. This, as you would imagine, makes baptism something to be approached with great reverence. Churches that hold the sacramental view stress that it must be done correctly – for instance, explicitly in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and it must be done by the correct personnel: that is, by ordained clergy. So you've got that so far. Baptism is an action of God alone that must be done correctly and by the right human or it doesn't count.

Now, in the sacramental view, lurking in the background, is the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation. Only those who are baptized get into heaven, which is an excellent reason for baptizing infants. You never know. But not everyone accepts that. Some people wonder about this notion of baptism as a prerequisite for salvation. What about the baby who dies at birth, before being baptized? They shouldn't go to hell, should they? Well, for centuries, the Roman church answered that question with the idea of "Limbo." This was a place that wasn't quite heaven, but certainly wasn't hell. Just a few years ago, though, the college of cardinals reconsidered this doctrine and eliminated Limbo, thus evidently letting all those babies into heaven, which was, you know, big of them. So now babies get a pass. Others wonder about the effectiveness of baptism. Once you're baptized, are you guaranteed a place in heaven? What

about a baptized infant who grows up to become, oh, say, Adolf Hitler? Even the sacramental crew balk at this, so it's not quite absolute. In summary, then, from the sacramental perspective, baptism is an absolutely essential and effective element of salvation, except when it isn't.

Hmm. This is taking a bit longer than I thought. I'll just take one more moment to describe the non-sacramental perspective, which is the one I grew up with as a Baptist. Now in the non-sacramental view, baptism is *not* necessary for salvation. Nothing happens in the action of baptism itself; instead, baptism is just an outward sign of a salvation that has already taken place through faith. This is why most in this group do not baptize infants, because the person's supposed to have already chosen to follow Christ before being baptized, and to make such a decision requires that they fully understand all the nuances of faith, so as to make a mature decision. I was baptized when I was seven. Now, some of you may be thinking that a 7-year-old might not fully understand what it means to follow Christ, and of course you're right. I didn't. But it was all right, because I was *going* to as I got older. So everyone have that now? In the non-sacramental view, baptism is for those who completely understand what they're doing, or at least have the potential to one day understand. But no babies.

Of course if baptism is not necessary for salvation, then you might ask if people need to be baptized at all, and the answer from this perspective is that you don't, except that you can't be a member of a church or take communion unless you're baptized. Plus – just one more thing – most non-sacramental folks stress that baptism has to be done by full immersion. This is because the Greek word *baptizo*, literally means “dunk.” If you join a full immersion church and have been baptized with inadequate water, they'll make you go back and do it right. So, to summarize the non-sacramental theology of baptism: Only people who understand what they're doing can be baptized, plus some others. Moreover, baptism is not necessary, but you have to do it, and the action of baptism doesn't actually *do* anything, but if you didn't use enough water, it won't work. So, it's clear so far?

Just one more thing before we get to the sermon. There's another group, which is mostly a subset of the non-sacramental group, that talks about a second baptism, of the Holy Spirit, like we read about happening in the Book of Acts. Call these the second blessing people. Now these people stress that only the first baptism is necessary, not the second one, but then they spend most of their time and energy trying to foster and experience the second baptism because even if it's not strictly speaking, necessary, it's *way* cooler.

Finally – bear with me one more second – I should probably explain where United Methodists are in all this. John Wesley was from a very sacramental background (Anglicanism) but was also a part of the very non-sacramental 18th century Revivalist movement. So he accepted both the sacramental and the non-sacramental views of baptism, and so do United Methodists. Now some of you might ask, “How is that even possible?” [Pause] Hush.

Here's what Methodists say about baptism. Baptism is a sacrament, a means of grace in which God takes the lead and bestows grace on us. Also, baptism is an outward sign of and testimony to the grace which God has *already* granted to us from our birth. Baptism is a testimony to an individual's wish to follow Christ, *and* it is an expression of a community's resolve to lead others into the knowledge of Christ. We baptize infants as an expression of that community's faith, and we baptize adults for the same reason, plus a few others. Baptism is *not* a

magical guarantee of salvation, and baptism is a mystical moment of union with God. Baptism is not a symbol; baptism is a non-symbol that symbolizes our repentance and God's cleansing forgiveness. So is everyone clear now?

I think this morning I may have been offensive to every Christian tradition in existence. If by some chance, I missed your tradition, please leave a note with the office and I will try to be offensive to you in the earliest possible sermon. Fair's fair. But being serious – for the first time all morning – here's what I think you should take away from this sermon.

First, we all end up tied in knots when we try to explain baptism. Same thing happens with communion. Everyone's official doctrine on the sacraments can be picked apart and made to look silly. Nothing wrong with that. Doctrines of faith are *supposed* to reach beyond reason; if they don't they're just arguments.

Second, ignore the extremes. Baptism is not magic ("Poof! All forgiven!"), and baptism is not just a sermon illustration ("See, the water represents God's cleansing.") Instead, baptism, like the Lord we serve, is both divine and human. So the sacrament is both an action of God and a statement of faith by us, both miraculous and practical. If it were not both, we'd have stopped doing it centuries ago.

So, third, when Christ gave himself to be baptized by John, he was bowing before God's divine blessing and rising to begin a life of ministry to human beings. And when we baptize someone, of any age, we too stand on that margin. God's part of baptism is to make it powerful; our part is to make it meaningful; and between power and meaning is the sacred.

Closing prayer: God, in a world in which old doctrinal walls have either fallen or else stand pointlessly along paths that nobody uses, give your children in the Christian church humility. Help us to learn from each other, and just as gladly to teach. Bring us closer together, not by making us identical, but by making us appreciative of our differences. This I ask in your holy name, Amen.