

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 7, 2007

Acts 8.14-17
Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Spiritual Baptism

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”
—Luke 3.16

Our texts for the First Sunday after Epiphany remind us of the Baptism of Jesus, and thus of our own baptisms. Because it falls this year on the first Sunday of the month, we have a nice opportunity. As we receive communion today, we can remember and reaffirm our baptisms. We give thanks for our initial adoption into the Christian family, even as we receive that family’s ongoing nourishment. Past and present are united in the holy meal—and future, too!—as it is a meal that looks forward to the great banquet at the close of history.

To be perfectly honest, the First Sunday after Epiphany is one of those Sundays that I find rather challenging as a preacher. It comes up every year, right about this time when we’re still recovering from Christmas and thinking about New Years resolutions. There is no clamor from the congregation for more emphasis on this subject. In 21 years of pastoral evaluations, I’ve never once read, “I wish our pastor would preach more sermons on the Baptism of Jesus. I don’t feel like he’s made that clear at all.” And, finally, it is one of those stories that sort of speaks for

itself. It is hard to find a lot to add: Jesus was baptized. A voice from heaven spoke. It was a big deal. Okay...now what do I say *next* year?

Usually I handle this vexing homeetical problem in a way befitting my many years of pastoral experience and great theological erudition: I let the Associate Pastor preach that day. But this year, I must have gotten confused by the dates. I thought these texts were for *next* Sunday. Doh!

So, here we are. Here we are with a familiar story about a familiar sacrament. And maybe with the gnawing feeling that neither of them is really that big a deal. It is just one of those “preliminary” gospel stories that gets us ready for the main event of Jesus’ teaching, death, and resurrection. As for the sacrament of Baptism...well, it is nice, and we sure do like seeing those babies in church, but...does it really matter? Does anything really happen?

Methodist Bishop William Willimon tells a story about when he moved into a new neighborhood to be the pastor of the local Methodist congregation. His vocation piqued the interest of his neighbor, who attended a charismatic church, and told Willimon that she had received the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Willimon responded, “That makes two of us.” The story continues:

I could tell from her expression that she was skeptical of my claim. A few conversations later, she became downright incredulous of my assertion that I too was “charismatic.”

“I’m praying for you,” she said one day leaning over the hedge, pointing her hedge clippers at me in a menacing way.

I thanked her and asked if she were praying for anything specific for me. She said she was. “I’m praying that you’ll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

I thanked her again and told her that she need not bother God with that request since the Lord had quite graciously given me the Spirit already.

I could tell that she doubted. “Really?” she asked. “I would be interested to know how and when you received the Holy Spirit.”

“I can tell you that,” I responded. “I was a few months old at the time. A preacher named Forrester took me in his arms, poured water on my head, and told me that I had the Holy Spirit.”

“That isn’t baptism of the Holy Spirit,” she retorted.

“Well, the preacher said I got it, and everybody else said I got it. And, if that didn’t take, when I was about ten years old, another preacher named Herbert stood me up in front of the church, put his hands on my head and said, in effect, ‘You’ve got the Spirit. Now use it.’ And, as if that wasn’t enough, a bishop named Tullis put his hands on my head one night in my mid-twenties and said, ‘You’ve got the Spirit, now get out there and preach the gospel.’ About the worst you could say for me is that I don’t use the Spirit’s gifts, or I don’t always live by the Spirit, but you sure can’t deny that I’ve got it.”

All of this so thoroughly baffled my “charismatic” neighbor that she shook her head in dismay and began furiously clipping her hedge while muttering something to herself about “dear Lord.”¹

This conversation may have a familiar ring for some of us. There is a kind of Christian thinking that can sound like what Willimon aptly calls “me graduate school Christian, you kindergarten Christian” boasting.

Now, let me be clear. I mean no blanket denigration of evangelical or charismatic Christians. I consider these folks to be genuine brothers and sisters in

Christ and I think we often have much to learn from their spiritual practices. What I am saying is that we need to regain a beefier understanding of our own spiritual practices—practices such as baptism.

The New Testament does talk about two different kinds of baptism, but it is not the same two kinds that were distinguished by that neighbor over the hedge. In the New Testament, there is the baptism of John, which is a pre-Christian baptism of repentance. Then there is the baptism of Jesus, which is something different. Just to make things more confusing, Jesus comes to receive baptism from John. But when Jesus is baptized, the old baptism of John's is finished. Christian Baptism is inaugurated.

Up until the Baptism of Jesus, the emphasis was on human action. John called people to repentance, to living a better way of life, and they responded by being baptized. If Christianity was the religion of John the Baptist, it would be a much more moralistic religion. It would focus on ethics, on what we do. But that's not what Christianity is.

For Christianity is not the religion of John, but rather the religion of Jesus. When Jesus appeared at the river to be baptized himself, the emphasis shifted—once an for all. With the Holy Spirit descending as a dove and the voice speaking from heaven, a new focus for baptism emerged. No longer is baptism about what

we do. No longer is baptism about repentance and self-improvement. Now baptism is about God's action. It is about what God does in Jesus Christ. It is about God's Son, the beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

As the Christian Church began to practice Baptism, this is what it was about—God's gift of grace in Jesus. Our understanding of baptism is firmly grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore it is not dependent on certain human reactions or manifestations. Since God is acting, we can trust it—even if we can't see it clearly.

Adult Christians may have powerful experiences of faith or conversion. These experiences are, in fact, *baptismal* experiences. They are part of the ongoing unfolding of baptism in the life of a believer. The gifts are fully given—even in infant baptism—but it takes a lifetime for them to become fully visible.

You might think of Baptism as when we are imprinted with Christian DNA. Just as with our human DNA, all of our qualities and attributes are present from birth (or re-birth, in the Christian case). As babies are fully human, so are those who are baptized fully Christian. Everything is there. Nothing more needs to be added. But it takes time for the initial imprint to develop.

Most of us here probably have no memory of our Baptism. And yet its imprint is real and formative in our lives. This morning as we receive the

Sacrament of Communion, I invite you to remember your baptismal gift and to celebrate the Spirit's unique presence in you.

Let us pray. We thank you, Lord, for the Baptismal love that surrounds us in your church. Show us how to live and display the precious gift that is within each of us. Amen.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, A Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1980), pages 73-74.