

St. David's Presbyterian Church

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St. John's, NL

Baptism of the Lord

“What does Jesus' Baptism have to do with us?”

Dr. J. Dent

Baptism is something we talk about from time to time in the Christian Church. It tends to be a subject which polarizes and alienates Christians from various backgrounds. This was not its original intention, as you might have already guessed. Baptism was meant to be the initiation into the family of God. Now the paedobaptists (those who baptize infants and children) such as ourselves and Anglicans, Roman Catholics, United, Lutherans and others tend to see baptism as a time where a child is brought into the family of God through the Covenant their parents publically proclaim as their own until such a time as they can make their own decision to confirm was done for them by grace, often before they even know what is happening. Then at the Confirmation time, or Membership classes a teenager or older person is asked whether they want to formally confess their faith publically and learn a bit more about what this means. Classes are offered to make sure there is a front door open to the church family. Anyone is invited to these classes, and if you would like for me to offer such a class soon, I hope you will contact me and we will set up a mutually agreeable time for the group.

Now other Christians believe that you should not baptize infants or young children. They hold to what most call “believers' baptism,” where the person is expected to give an account of their faith publically, and based upon that they are immersed, sometimes in a tank in the church building or in a swimming pool or other larger body of water outdoors usually not at this time of year. These Christians usually hold that any other baptism except by a person old enough to express their faith publically and by immersion is not a valid baptism. These folks who are usually Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren, Mennonite, non-denominational and others hold this initiation into the Body of Christ in an exclusionary way. Some don't even accept a baptism unless it occurs in their particular church.

The challenge within our context of baptism is calling people to clear, individual and mature commitment to Christ. Their challenge is knowing when to allow someone to be baptized, to allow that they are truly saved by God and are a part of the family of God. And then there is the Salvation Army who doesn't practice water baptism or communion. So they interpret these sacraments in a spiritual way, and some wonder if they are even a church because of it. But they are a church and a part of the Body of Christ.

So baptism often pulls us apart in the Body of Christ, rather than bringing us together as it says in Ephesians 4: 4-5: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all...” We certainly all believe that the body of Christ is greater than our one little assembly or even our larger affiliation or denomination. At least I think we all believe that.

We all believe that becoming a part of the Body of Christ means that we are sinners and we need to be received into the Christian Church. It is not automatic. We are not born Christian, even though some people think they are. We need to receive in some way what Jesus has done on our behalf. We do not save ourselves, but we do look to God in Jesus Christ to change our rebellious hearts and establish relationship with us, and each of us with Jesus. Our sins separate us from God, and unless we acknowledge the unmanageable nature of our lives and our deep need for Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour, then we cannot experience the new life Jesus offers us. So we say “no” to our rebellious ways and “yes” to God and God’s way for us, and “yes” to Jesus and his way for us. Then we know we are in fact a part of the body of Christ, no matter what our baptismal experience.

Now one thing we don’t often talk about across our denominational and affiliational barriers is why Jesus had to be baptized. Do you know why? Normally we are baptized because we want either individually or our children to repent of sin, to turn away from our rebellion against God and to say “yes” to God’s way and will for each of us and for our children. This is just as Peter said on the day of Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized, everyone of you...The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38-39)

But clearly Jesus didn’t go to John the Baptizer to be baptized because he needed to repent of his sin. He was the sinless one of God, God himself, unstained by sin, tempted in everyway as we are, yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). So what was he thinking? Even John the Baptist said that he needed to come to Jesus for baptism, not the other way around, (Matt. 3:14) an insight that Matthew alone records. Jesus tells John that this is to be done to “fulfill all righteousness.” John accepts this and baptizes Jesus. But what is the righteousness that Jesus is fulfilling at his baptism?

We know that Jesus’ baptism was the beginning of his public ministry, although he would immediately be tempted by the devil in the wilderness. We know that Jesus’ baptism was the public initiation into all that God

would do through Jesus. This makes sense of the Holy Spirit dove that descends upon him and the voice from heaven of God himself saying He is pleased with Jesus.

So that fulfillment of righteousness is the whole ministry and life of Jesus at the beginning, as well as at the end at the Cross and the Resurrection. And here we see the celebration of the timeless God in the midst of time saying how much He rejoices in who His Son is, and what His Son will do. This is a moment where everything is encapsulated in the new life Jesus is bringing to all who would receive it. Even before the temptation, even before the miracles, even before the disciples and the 70 and the 4000 and the 5000 are fed and the man and the child brought back to life, before the Gospel is preached in dozens of languages, before people say "yes" to Jesus, here at the baptism it is all being celebrated. Jesus' baptism is a reminder to us that his saving plan precedes all our plans. His saving work precedes all our works and thoughts. His salvation and the restoration of relationship between individual human beings and God as a new Eden, a new Jerusalem is all there at Jesus' baptism. This reminds us that we receive our faith. We receive the grace of God that amazes us and goes before our confessions, before and in spite of our behaviours.

In Jesus' baptism, we see that he fulfills righteousness before he does any works, any words, or anything. We simply have the beauty of the Trinity, reveling in what Jesus will do by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the will and in the love of the Father. And then all our baptisms, whatever mode, whatever time in our lives, however we understand baptism become echoes of the One baptism that was for us. Jesus our Lord, laying down his life and his ambitions for us. He becomes our new high priest, our new King, our new Prophet, our new Friend.

And we together hear the voice of God, directing us to Jesus. There should be the same urgency today in the church, with its many divisions, to take the time to overcome the divisions and listen to the voice of God pointing us again to Jesus. I try to take time out of my weekly schedule for praying with, and having relationships with Christians of many different denominations and traditions. I have learned much over the years beyond my Presbyterianism. And I have said before, my maternal grandmother was Roman Catholic. She married a Presbyterian. My mother married an Anglican and so I grew up Anglican. I didn't even know my mother grew up Presbyterian. But when I did go to a home bible study as a teenager, I found out most of the youth went to a large Presbyterian church and so I

publically proclaimed my faith as a fourteen year old and was set on the path that I am currently following. I met a young woman at seminary, and married her. I learned she grew up here in this city in the Salvation Army. So my personal past has something do with where I am today.

We need each other in the body of Christ. We need to remember often that it is grace that holds the Church not only as an institution, but also as a human gathering of broken people. None of us have the perfect way, but we do have each other. In many ways, we are our own most precious resource. So we must guard our tongues, not giving up meeting together...but encouraging one another, building up one another.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity starts next Sunday. Your bulletin has details. I will be on the VOWR broadcast of the Meditation at 9 am, Monday to Friday. We will be considering how we might continue to foster a better relationship between our various expressions of Christianity. This is not a time for finger pointing nor is it a time that we can afford to not get along with each other. We need to remember, for instance, that most of the New Testament letters were written to cities. We should consider anew what it means to work together in this city as various expressions of the one body of Christ.

This is hard and complicated. We have many prejudices against each other, some of them may even be well founded. But these should not hinder our attempts to care for one another and to love on another.

Our congregation is perhaps one of the first congregations planted in this city, and continuing to today. We celebrate our 235th anniversary this year. If we can help in the city, then let us rise to such a challenge. We host many community groups. I sit on the Global Day of Prayer Committee and the executive of the St. John's Council of Churches. Lynn and I have co-led groups in another church here in town and have been greatly blessed by this.

I hope you will make it a personal project this year to improve relations with our Christians, and to forgive, where possible, those who have hurt you in the wider body of Christ. We need each other and we need the Lord in these days.

Let us pray.