



*I Am Baptized: To Begin Again*

*(2nd in the sermon series on New Year's Resolutions)*

*Acts 8:14-17 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

*Sunday, January 13th, 2019 ~ The Baptism of Christ*

*(Renewal of Baptism Vows)*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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*Text: "For as of yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 8:16)*

A Presbyterian and Baptist minister were discussing baptism. The Presbyterian asked the Baptist if he considered a person baptized if he was immersed in water up to his waist. "No," the Baptist minister replied.

"How about if he is immersed up to his neck." "No," the Baptist replied.

"Ummm. Well, how about if he is immersed up to his eyebrows? Would you consider him baptized then?" "No," the Baptist replied.

"Well, then," the Presbyterian minister said triumphantly, "it's only the little bit of water on the top of the head that counts!"

We have no record of the Baptist minister's reply.

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"For as of yet, the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had been only baptized in the name of the Lord."

What an odd comment, don't you think? And, for that matter, what is baptism? Is it something that we simply "do", some kind of rite of passage or quaint tradition? Does the amount of water really make a difference.

Years ago I served a church where my predecessor was in the process of doing baptism when she suddenly discovered that no one had put water in the baptism font! Panicked, she whispered to the couple presenting their child, "We'll fake it." When I arrived I was asked if the baptism was "real". Did it really happen? A quick call to the office of the General Assembly put everyone's mind at ease. The efficacy of the sacrament, I was told does not lay in the water but in the intent. Yes, the baptism really did occur.

But we can get hung up on all kinds of things when it comes to our spiritual lives and to church. For example, today's text sent me on a grand quest. The text, first of all struck me as odd. What did the writer of the Luke-Acts tradition mean when he said that the Samaritans had been baptized "in the

name of Jesus but had not yet received the Holy Spirit”? What’s he talking about? Did he mean anything of significance by the comment?

I don’t know. Through the centuries this question has captured the church’s theological imagination.

Some, including Pentecostals, believe that the only real baptism is a baptism of the Holy Spirit. I remember when I was a seminary student doing a round of what is called “Clinical Pastoral Education” or “CPE” and was assigned to a surgical intensive care unit. Some people stick with you, even though your encounter with them may have been brief. One such person for me is Chester Baise. Chester had a breathing tube at the base of his throat. He couldn’t speak but he could talk with his eyes, his smile or frown and by nodding or shaking his head. Chester was never going to leave the surgical ICU. At the end of one of my daily visits I asked Chester if he wanted to pray with me. He nodded. I closed my eyes and bowed my head and began to pray. As I prayed I heard this whispering-like sound. I stopped. The whispering stopped. I started again; so did the whispering. I peeked out of the corner of my eye and saw Chester with his eyes closed, hands folded making the same whispering sound. It wasn’t until later that my CPE supervisor told me that Chester must have been literally “praying with me”. He was evidently Pentecostal. For Pentecostals baptism by the Holy Spirit occurs at the time of a person’s conversion and manifests itself by the “speaking in tongues.”

Roman Catholic theology states the gift of the Holy Spirit is present at baptism but that it is not complete until one’s “confirmation”.

Those of the so-called “Reformed” faith which includes Presbyterians and Congregationalists say that baptism is the outward sign on an inward grace. The Holy Spirit is present before, during, and after our baptism. It’s presence is not dependent on human action or inaction.

All that being said, I believe that the Christian community spends far too much time majoring in things of minor significance. I have come to believe that in the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, the demonic shadowy forces of Evil wins whenever there are divisions within local congregations, within denominations, or among denominations. As long as we can be encouraged to fight and argue with one another we divert resources and energies away from the work of God’s Kingdom here on earth: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, rehabilitating the imprisoned, and caring for the least, the last, the lost and the lonely.

As long ago as 1946 German theologian Martin Niemoller wrote multiple times about how subtle the forces of this world can appeal to our lesser angels.

“In Germany,  
first they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me--and there was no one left to speak for me.

I believe that our baptism is an acknowledgment of God's claim upon the lives of our children and upon ourselves.

*I remember reading the haunting words of Kahil Gibran years ago.  
You children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you.  
And though they are with you they belong not to you.*

*You give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow  
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*

*You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth.  
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
and He bends you with His might  
that His arrows may go swift and far.*

*Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;  
For even as he loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable.  
(The Prophet)*

*"If we live, we live unto the Lord," Paul wrote, "and if we die, we die unto the Lord. In both life and death, we belong to the Lord."*

I believe that the life that we live, the decisions that we make, the things that we do--the big and the grand as well as the small and seemingly insignificant--is our thank you note to God for the grace given to us.

The baptism font is a visible reminder not only of God's claim upon our life but God's call to us. This call is a call not to be conformed to the ways of this broken world but to be transformed into the image of God reflected in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The epistle of I John tells us that God is love and that perfect love cast out fear. "Fear not" and "be not afraid" occurs over 80 times in the Bible. Our baptism calls us to be bold in our love and to never let fear win life's battles. There is a reason why The letter of I Corinthians speaks about this bold world changing love in these words:

*Love never gives up.  
Love cares more for others than for self.  
Love cares more for others than for self.  
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.  
Love doesn't strut,  
Doesn't have a swelled head,*

*Doesn't force itself on others,  
(Love) Isn't always "me first,"  
Doesn't fly off the handle,  
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,  
Doesn't revel when others grovel,  
(Love) takes pleasure in the flowing of truth,  
Puts up with anything,  
Trusts God always,  
Always look for the best,  
Never looks back,  
But keeps going to the end.  
Love never dies.  
(The Message)*

Our baptism reminds us that there is an Eternal Love that enveloped us before we even knew what love is. This enveloping Love calls us to live into our Baptism to the glory of God.

Let those with the ears to hear, do so. Amen.