

Waters of Love
Matthew 3:13-17
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St. John United Methodist Church
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Have you ever noticed the rather cute way little children sometime misunderstand the words and rituals of the church? A woman who served as a church organist in Jackson, Mississippi, tells of the evening her 3 yr. old son sat beside her in the darkness as she played softly for a baptism. This church practiced immersion. The pastor was covering the mouth and nose of each person as they were lowered into the water with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The boy whispered, "Mommy, what is he saying?" "Listen carefully and you tell me," she answered. Soon the boy whispered, "Now I know. He's saying, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and hold your nose, Amen.'"

It's not always children who get things mixed up. The story is told of a pastor who was preaching a revival. At one point in his sermon he told the folks that Jordan baptized Jesus in the John. When some of the folks snickered, it upset him because he knew that was not supposed to be funny so he repeated it. "Jordan baptized Jesus in the John." When he did the church broke up. Confused, he went ahead with his sermon and did not know until later what he had said. I understand he almost didn't come back for the next service.

Children aren't the only ones who do not fully understand baptism. We adults have questions too. There is the question of the relationship between baptism and salvation. Many folks want to know if baptism will insure one's salvation. Several years ago at the hospital I counseled with a mother whose daughter had just delivered a baby born dead. In the midst of her deep grief one of her concerns was that the baby had not been baptized.

Some people wonder about the method of baptism: immersion, where you get dunked; pouring, where you get showered; or sprinkling, where just the top of your head gets wet. How about this question: Does a person need to know what she or he is doing at baptism? If yes, what about infant baptism? How can a baby know what is happening?

The questions are real and to this day opinions on baptism remain a source of controversy. In fact baptism has a history of being a HOT item in the church. Several hundred years ago during the Reformation there emerged a new sect of Christians who practiced "believer's baptism" and were nicknamed "Anabaptists", "ana" meaning "again." The Anabaptists taught that persons should be baptized again as adults at the time of their conversion to Christ, and that this baptism should be by immersion. This so infuriated some of the reformation leaders who believed in infant baptism that they made a proposal to the Anabaptists. "Alright, if you want to be baptized by immersion we will do it for you." Sounds like a nice Christian gesture, doesn't it? No way. When it came time for their baptism these leaders immersed the Anabaptists in water and held

them there until they were dead. From 1525-1527 this one group of Christians drowned about 2000 other Christians, all because of different views of baptism.

Today we do not resort to such violent actions, but the differences still exist. If I ever get an opportunity to speak to a group of Baptists I will surely tell this story. Apparently, two little boys had a cat that had a litter of kittens. They wanted to baptize the kittens so they got a pail of water and one by one, they dunked each kitten. Then they decided that the mother cat should be baptized too. But mother cat had a very different idea. She kicked and clawed, scratched and hissed, as the boys vainly tried to get her into the water. Realizing she was winning the battle, and being the good Baptist that he was, one boy said, "Oh well, let's just sprinkle her and let her go to hell!"

I would like to explore the attitude that has served as a basis for much of our questions about baptism. The key question is: DOES BAPTISM INVOLVE THE RESPONSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL BEING BAPTIZED OR IS IT ESSENTIALLY SOMETHING GOD DOES? If you will bear with a bit more history I would like to show how we have been shaped with a particular attitude concerning baptism.

After the Reformation there came a time when European men and women asked a great deal of questions about life in general. This period of time was called the Enlightenment, and it flourished in the 1700's. During this time a new way of thinking helped to develop modern philosophy, psychology, and science. This was the time when the Scientific Method was born. There was a great desire to make everything reasonable, rational, and understandable. But in their drive to enlighten people with understanding they made a crucial mistake. They took this same attitude, which worked well in the areas of science and psychology, and applied it to religion. What happened was that human understanding came to be stressed over divine activity.

And today we still reflect this Enlightenment view as we wonder what baptism means to us, rather than considering what it means to God. Or we do the opposite and react against the Enlightenment's stress on reason and logic by basing baptism on feelings. And many well intentioned Christians believe that baptism must be felt if it is to be of value. But the work of God does not depend on how you or I feel. God's work in us is recognized at baptism. Sometimes we feel God's work in us. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we understand. Sometimes we don't. But it is GOD'S WORK, not ours! We are the recipients of God's work, not the initiators. God chooses us. God promises to be our God. God will never leave us. The question of rebaptism at this point isn't really valid. For to rebaptize is to say that God's promises are not true. It is one thing to remember your baptism. It is another to be rebaptized.

Baptism is a gift from God. It does not insure salvation. But it does insure that one's entire life, from birth to death, will be under the promise and sign of the cross. It is entirely possible that this gift may be rejected or even lost. Have you ever lost a valuable gift? I have. When I was a teenager my father gave me a ring with a beautiful ruby set in the center. It had belonged to his father and Dad wanted me to have it. I can't remember how I lost the ring several years later.

But to this day I still feel regret and anger at myself for not taking better care of this very valuable gift...a gift that is now lost.

How are you treating your gift of baptism? How much care are you giving your relationship with Christ? In a Midwestern city there was a hospital whose officials discovered that the firefighting equipment had never been connected. For 35 years it had been relied upon for the safety of the patients in case of emergency. But it had never been attached to the city's water main. The pipe that led from the building extended 4 feet underground, and there it stopped! The medical staff and patients had felt complete confidence in the system, but it was a false security. Although the costly equipment with its polished valves and well-placed outlets was adequate for the building, it lacked the most important thing...WATER!

Baptism won't save us. What will save us and make us whole is a deeply connected relationship with God through Jesus Christ, a relationship that is also connected with the church family. Let me say it several different ways. You and I need to be introduced to and spend a lifetime getting to know God. We need a new birth experience, to be born again, and to begin to grow from infancy to maturity as the people of God. We need to intentionally walk the journey of faith and say no to other paths that may seem tempting. We need to accept our baptism and nurture it as a cherished gift from God.

I have here on my finger a ring...a wedding ring...a ring I do not intend to lose. This ring was given to me by Kim on our wedding day over 27 years ago. This ring is a daily reminder of the love we share. It is a visible sign that I belong to her and she belongs to me. Baptism is like the wedding ring. It too, is a sign, a symbol of the grace and love of God in our lives. Perhaps it would be a good idea to wear baptismal rings on our fingers...rings that would serve as reminders of the promise that we belong to God and God belongs to us.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the ritual, 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. Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

Friends, it is important that as Christians, as United Methodists, that we refuse to be ignorant about our baptism. When asked about what we believe about baptism we can speak boldly. Baptism is much more than a ritual. It is much more than a belief. It is much more than water. It is about a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.