

## **“Water, River, Spirit, Grace”**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**Sunday, January 10, 2010 – The Baptism of Christ**

**Rev. James Campbell**

This past week at the monthly meeting of the Board of Stewards, we were discussing the need to have more volunteers to assist in worship: more good folks to greet and read Scripture and serve as communion stewards. When we got to the part about recruiting communion stewards, however, the room got strangely quiet. One member said something about communion being “mysterious”; something that the clergy did. The more I listened, the more I began to suspect that if members of the venerable Board of Stewards were a little spooked by communion, maybe some of the rest of you were as well. What exactly does communion mean and why do we do it?

We’re not the only folks to wonder about such things. The people, who make up our United Church of Christ, come from all sorts of backgrounds and bring with them all sorts of ideas about the sacraments. Some are high church, some low church and some are no church in background. Because it’s such a mix, we do very little explaining about any of the uncommon things we do in this room. And it’s not just communion. Why do we sing hymns? Why do we

collect an offering? Why do we let someone stand in a pulpit and carry on for 20 minutes or so?

In the Protestant Churches, two sacraments are celebrated: Baptism and Holy Communion. Both of them can be tied back directly to the life of Christ.

Whenever we take communion, in words and ritual and through the sense of taste, we are remembering, with our bodies, the Passover, the Last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his friends the night before his execution. And when people are baptized, we remember that Jesus himself was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. So there is a direct connection back to Jesus in Communion and Baptism. That's one of the reasons we observe these things. But is that connection to Jesus' own life enough or is there more?

Today is set aside in the liturgical calendar as the Baptism of Christ Sunday. And every year we rather hesitantly observe it. We're hesitant because implicit in this celebration are some pretty serious theological dilemmas – so serious that some early Christians didn't think the baptism of Christ should be observed at all. They understood that in talking about Jesus being baptized, they were opening a theological can of worms. After all, what have we been taught about baptism? Isn't it about sin and redemption? Aren't there notions

of being washed clean? Isn't there something in there about that perplexing idea of original sin? But the Scripture says that Christ was without sin. So what on earth was he doing in the muddy Jordan? Secondly, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John. In the ancient world, to be baptized by someone meant to submit to their authority. But the New Testament is rather clear that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, including John the Baptist. And Luke presents a third problem that the other three Gospels do not. Luke claims that when Jesus was baptized, John was already in prison awaiting execution. So who, then, baptized Jesus according to Luke? No wonder some of the early Christians decided to just not talk about it. Not us! We have dedicated an entire Sunday to it!

Part of the reason the story of the baptism of Jesus is so problematic is that we read this story, like we do so many others in the Bible, through the lens of our own presuppositions. The church tries to make these stories fit into neat theological categories, systematic categories. We push and shove these stories through the pigeon holes of doctrine and church history. And by doing so, we do not allow them to speak for themselves, with all their loose ends and unanswered questions. It's almost as if we're afraid. There is no need, really, for God is often found in the loose ends and unanswered questions of our

lives. And whenever and however we find God, our lives are changed. So is there anything in this loose-ended story of Jesus' baptism that might change our lives?

John the Baptist was preaching repentance out on the banks of the Jordan River; telling folks that they had to turn around and walk in a new direction. Apparently the people were quite moved by what he said, and longing for that new direction, they waded into the muddy Jordan. One day, Jesus happened along and decided that he should be baptized too. Despite some initial protests from Cousin John, he finally did what Jesus asked. When Christ came up out of the water, the spirit of God came down like a dove, while a voice announced: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

While the crowds and perhaps some of us are wowed by the details of the heavenly dove and the voice of God, notice what is not present at this moment. There is no talk of original sin being washed away; no ordained priest or pastor there to administer the sacrament; no holy water; no sacred space; no special clothing; just some people down by the riverside, under the open sky, wanting a new life; longing to know that they are loved. And Jesus was among them, using common water to help remember what is true.

We all need reminders about what is true. And so, we take pictures to capture a beautiful moment. We keep journals to remember beautiful words. We hug our friends and lovers to remember their bodies. Photos and words and embraces are but outward and visible reminders of an inward and spiritual grace – and that is the definition of a sacrament.

Once a month, we gather around a table to eat bread and drink from a cup in order to recall, with our bodies, the Last Supper of Jesus. There is something holy about the physicality of it. And we use our bodies to remember what is true about the self-giving love of Jesus. And we do so on a regular basis. The problem with baptism is that most of us have absolutely no memory of it and we are never given a chance to recreate it. If the baptism of Jesus was a physical reminder of how dearly he was loved and how pleased God was with him, then it seems to me that we need reminders of that too.

The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther needed that reminder. Like so many other great spiritual leaders, Luther was plagued for most of his life by doubt and feelings of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those personal demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have

been baptized." And when that inscription alone was not enough, he would touch his own forehead and say out loud: "Martin, you have been baptized."

My mentor in ministry, George Bailey, had his own way to remember his baptism. George is a character; a fresh and original thinker and often misunderstood by those unwilling to think outside the box. And nobody was more boxed in than I was when we worked together. Sometimes I just thought he was weird. I don't think so anymore. He once encouraged the congregation to use their morning showers as a way to remember their baptism. That's what he did, he said. Each day as the waters poured down on his head and body; George remembered that grace and love and mercy were poured out upon him day after day by a good and loving God. George Bailey even had the audacity to claim that his morning shower was a sacrament - an outward and physical reminder of an inward and spiritual grace.

The physical helps us connect with the spiritual. And once you understand that, then the simplest gifts of life are means of grace, vivid reminders that we are loved beyond measure. And could it be that that was why Jesus was baptized? Do you think that it's possible that before he began his three

intensive and controversial years of ministry that he wanted to feel, on his own skin, the abundant grace and love of God?

At the conclusion of this sermon, I invite any of you who so desire to come forward and receive some simple water on your forehead. When you do I will say: "Remember your baptism and be thankful."

Now these waters are not magic, but they are powerful. They are powerful because they can help us to remember with the physicality of our bodies that thing we long to be true but sometimes forget: that the grace of God is deeper than the oceans; that the love of God is an ever-flowing river; that the forgiveness of God washes us clean and gives us a fresh start – and not just today, but any day – every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.