

Sunday, January 22, 2012

St. Peter's, Forestville

Baptism

Living near the Great Lakes has affected our thinking about water. We are blessed by an abundance of it. Some people in this world are not so nearly fortunate. Water has been in the news a lot over the last decade, with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Tsunami in Southeast Asia, and the ongoing cycles of drought and floods. The Western United States witnessed massive flooding. Australia has seen historic flooding. Even the less dramatic storms and snowstorms that disrupt our daily lives make the daily news. Water is part of the drama of our life. It brings life, but not enough or too much can bring destruction. So this morning let's focus on the life giving power of clean, fresh water as we prepare to Baptize three of our parishioners. Madalyne, Joshua and Austin.

There are two very different ways to think about **Baptism**. The first approach recognizes the time of **Baptism** as a saving moment in which the person being baptized accepts the love and forgiveness of God. The person then considers himself/herself "saved." They may grow in the faith through the years, but nothing which they will experience after their **Baptism** will be as important as their **Baptism**. They always will be able to recall their **Baptism** as the time when their life was profoundly changed.

The second approach wouldn't disagree with any of that, but would add to it significantly. This idea affirms **Baptism** as the time when God's love and forgiveness are experienced. It also recognizes **Baptism** as a time of change. However, where the first approach isolates the very act of **Baptism**, the pouring of water on their heads, the second approach understands **Baptism** more as a beginning. While it is true that in the

waters of **Baptism** God laid claim on our lives, it is also true that we spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out what that means. The first understanding often overlooks the journey which follows **Baptism**.

Baptism frequently carries the connotation of having arrived. Sometimes people say to their ministers, "I want to be baptized and join the church as soon as I get my life in order." Of course, if that is what any of us are waiting on, we will never be baptized. The Emperor Constantine, who is famous for building a great many churches, wasn't baptized until his death bed. He was afraid that he would sin after he was baptized. None of us will ever have our lives sufficiently in order to be baptized. **Baptism** is not something we earn, nor is it a sign that we have found all the answers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Baptism is a beginning. It is the desire to see the world differently, to see each other differently, and even to see ourselves differently.

Baptism is a fresh start, not a destination. **Baptism** calls into question our previous lives, it does not bless them. **Baptism** is not a trial-free membership, but a rite of initiation into a way of life in which Jesus promised there would be trials. You should understand that your life after today will not be easier but more difficult. Satan will come after you and tempt you to turn away from God.

Jesus' **Baptism** serves as a model for our **Baptism**. For Jesus, **Baptism** represents the beginning of his ministry. While some ultimate questions may have been answered when he was with John the Baptist in the Jordan River, Jesus continued to deal with questions and temptations throughout his life. The **Baptism** of Jesus is one of our favorite stories. We love to hear how the heavens opened, to imagine the dove descending, and to hear God's blessing on the Son. We would like to think something like that will happen this morning when we baptize these three young people. What we should be prepared for is that our journey of faith, much like Jesus' journey, continues to unfold

long after our **Baptism** as we try to discern what our **Baptism** means in our daily living. How will this change me and my relationship with everyone I meet?

We can begin to understand more about our **Baptism** by thinking of it in three ways.

First, **Baptism** is about beginning anew. It is a fresh start, even when we are fairly comfortable and satisfied with our old lives. Paul said we emerge from **Baptism** to walk "in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). There are two ways to make something new. We can start with nothing and make something new, or we can start with what we already have and make that new. **Baptism** transforms our lives and we think, speak, live, and act in ways that represent to the world the image of Christ.

Baptism transforms stinginess into generosity, narrow-mindedness into thoughtful consideration, and prejudice into love. **Baptism** transforms our fear of one another into a desire for true community and harmony, our suspicious motives into open, honest dialogue, and our hesitancy into boldness. **Baptism** transforms groups of people into churches, gatherings of individuals into a family of brothers and sisters, and church services into times of worship.

Does all that happen when we are baptized? No, but those are the kinds of things that happen through our lives as we continue to be open to what our **Baptism** means to us. The Christian life at its best is an ongoing transformation in which we continue to be shaped by the presence of Christ within us.

In Ephesians 4, which discusses many of the implications of **Baptism**, we are shown what this new life looks like. We are urged to lead a life worthy of our calling, and then we are told that such a life entails humility, gentleness, and patience. We are to bear with one another in

love, and are to make every effort to maintain unity in the body. The church in general has a reputation of rising to the great occasions the special celebration, the response to the hurricane, our concern for the dying but forgetting in between those times what life in the Spirit involves. Humility, gentleness, and patience won't get much coverage on the evening news, but those are marks of the Christian life. And how you three define Humility, gentleness and patience will change as you grow older.

The second part of **Baptism** is the good news that we have been included. Aren't we all just happy to belong, to be included? We can refer to this part of our **Baptism** as incorporation. We are included, incorporated into the body of Jesus Christ. This action came about as a result of a love that was designed to draw us in. And long after the act of **Baptism**, that love holds us together without ranking us as more or less important, allows us to disagree with each other without deserting one another, and leads us to use our different gifts without any need to compare them with somebody else's gifts.

Our **Baptism** is personal, but it is not private. That's why I am thrilled that it is during our Sunday worship. We are included alongside others. The waters of **Baptism** are not only symbolic of being cleansed from sin, but also of the power **Baptism** has to break down barriers between people. We share a common relationship with Jesus Christ in which the old divisions and designations no longer apply. While this part of **Baptism** can be called incorporation, it is easy to see how transformation is necessary in order for us to live with all who have been included by God's love. **Baptism** is not about being incorporated into the body with no intention of living and working with the other members of the body. As we are included alongside others, we realize that for the body to be healthy all must be transformed. As we are transformed, we are more likely to expand the circle of our love to include others as full partners in the church.

Baptism was like an ordination for Jesus. It was the beginning of his ministry. In our time we ordain priests and deacons, but we have removed from our understanding of **Baptism** the conviction that our lives are to be offered in service. When we enter the household of God, we do so with a vocation, the belief that God has called us to some particular work that will utilize our gifts in building up the body and in making a better world. You may spend a long time learning what God wants you to do but He has called you to a special ministry.

A part of **Baptism** is a call to serve. When we serve, we will encounter others who have been incorporated into the body and we will be challenged to see how our gifts complement the gifts of others. Also, as we work side by side, we will find that our humility, gentleness, and patience may be tested from time to time. In those moments we will realize that our transformation is still in process and we must not give up on it. In all of these things, **Baptism** is a beginning.

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after he had baptized her. No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant. "Little sister, by this act of **Baptism**, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say God is with you." And God will be with us as we live out our **Baptism**.