

“It’s Just a Little Water”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Most every morning that I walk up to the front of the church in Welsh, or in Lake Charles... unless I have been **distracted** by some pressing issue, like the computer program isn’t working, or a late choir rehearsal... I stop to pour the water in the baptismal font/bowl. Which I don’t know that too many people in worship give much thought to. ‘It’s just a little water.’

But, if/when we stop to think about it, this small act has a very LARGE significance. It is NOT ‘just a little water.’ It represents one of only TWO sacraments, one of only two holy acts participated in by Jesus, the very Son of God, in our reformed Christian tradition. On this particular Sunday, the week following Epiphany Sunday, the Christian Church recognizes it as “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. That day in our calendar on which we focus on what happened one pivotal day off the banks of the Jordan River outside Jerusalem. Baptism of believers in the One true God of Israel. The one true God of our world.

The passage from Luke describing this commissioning of Christ, and His followers, in their mission to that world, is partnered with another ‘baptism’ Scripture: where Peter and John engage in one of the most important “Acts of the Apostles”. they go to Samaria, a Gentile land quite unpopular with most Jews, to participate in another type of ‘baptism’ – the baptism of the Holy Spirit. A Spiritual anointing inextricably linked to the one administered with water.

So, from John the Baptizer to Jesus the Christ to the Disciples Peter and John, the importance of what we do here at this simple ‘bowl’ is clear. As we stand near this ‘Table of Remembrance,’ may it not be only to recall the holiness of the Lord’s Supper. But also, to ‘remember’ our baptism. To not fall into the easy trap that “It’s just a little water”.

As I considered these two stories about baptism, it occurred to me that there were 3 distinct ROLES being fulfilled by the central individuals in the two.

John the Baptist, who ‘officiated’ over this ‘service of baptism’ You might think of him as the MINISTER. Of course, there is Jesus. A willing participant, or I should say, recipient, of John’s ceremonial washing. But let us make no mistake about it. He is the MESSIAH. Messiah.’ Which means the ‘anointed one’.. as in ‘anointed’ in baptism. The Messiah promised throughout ancient history to come and ‘save’ the people from their sins. And finally, we have Peter and

John. Who find themselves being sent to help facilitate the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in new converts to Christianity. They were MESSENGERS.

And in all three of these... 'minister,' 'Messiah,' and 'messenger,' there was a two-fold aspect to the holy ordinance of baptism. Baptism by **water**, and baptism of the **Holy Spirit**. Yes, they both indicate our membership in the body of believers. But they are distinctly different. AND, in the words of a VERY old song by Frank Sinatra, "Love and Marriage," 'You can't have one without the other.' We are baptized by water as a SIGN of our being grafted into the community of faith in Christ, the Church. But it is the Holy Spirit baptism that is our SUPPLY of strength to BE the Church. Water is a sign...the Spirit is our supply. One is for a **moment**. The other is for a **lifetime**.

It was interesting for me to read in a statement of faith not in our "Book of Confessions," the Belgic Confession, about the role of the MINISTER in baptism. That while he/she IS the most visible individual in the Sacrament in worship... well, unless it's an infant being baptized... that role is quite secondary to that of CHRIST. Which goes right along with John the Baptizer's words through Luke: ***"I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."*** (Luke 3:16) John wanted to clearly dispel any 'delusions of grandeur' that anyone might have as to his importance. 'I am NOT the promised Messiah. I'm just a servant, who isn't even worthy enough to grovel at his feet and remove his dirty shoes. I am merely one called to MINISTER in His Name...'

As one who is also called as a 'Minister of Word and Sacrament,' I can certainly resonate with John's words. I too am not worthy to even untie Jesus' sandals. I am merely the Lord's representative in this Sacrament. But going beyond that, it must also be clearly communicated that the minister only handles the 'first part' of that baptism. The water. It is the other, most important part, the Holy Spirit, that is definitely out of HUMAN hands. But rather, in the ***"One who is more powerful"***: JESUS.

Which brings us to the One for whom this holy ordinance... where believers are 'ordained' for service... was established: Jesus, the Son of God and brother of mankind. Baptism marks beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It happened ***"when all the people were baptized."*** Why? Did Jesus also need to repent? Of course not. Not for himself. That is both the **mystery** and

majesty of His **baptism**. **Birth** – takes on our **flesh**. **Baptism** – takes on our **shame**. Stood on the banks in our **humanness**... to wade in the water and stand with us in our **sinfulness**.

When the Father's voice sounded from the heavens... ***"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"***. just why did He say that? It wasn't like Jesus had actually DONE any of his 'pleasing' acts to come: healing the sick, driving out demons, proclaiming the Word. Perhaps it was to express His pleasure that Jesus was clearly demonstrating his **solidarity** with the people. That he would relate to their human struggles, even in his co-existent Divinity. AND, to demonstrate their need to also be baptized in the Holy Spirit as THEY began their own personal ministries.

In the same way, we too need to demonstrate OUR 'solidarity' with our fellow man, woman, and child. We too must show how we relate to the hurts and struggles of others. We too must know of our need for the Holy Spirit in all the ways we are being called to minister in God's Holy Name. His love and dedication to our ministry should also give US strength...

There were some further words of that Belgic Confession I mentioned earlier that I believe puts that relationship between the human 'minister/mediator' and the TRUE 'Minister/Mediator' (capital 'M') in perspective: "In baptism, we are to focus not on what a minister does, but who Jesus IS: The One who washes, purifies, cleanses our **souls**. The One who renews our **hearts**, filling them with **comfort**... who assures us of His Father's **goodness**. Clothing us with **new life**, stripping away the **old**." NOT simply with a little water...

And finally, from the **minister** to the **Messiah**, we consider the **Messenger**. In our Acts passage, those 'messengers' were Peter and John. Those disciples who recognized that the conversion to the Christian faith by the Gentile Samaritans... marked by their water baptism... was incomplete without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They had followed their 'SIGN' on their journey of faith... now they needed 'SUPPLY' to complete their journey. And so, John and Peter ***"went... and prayed... and laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."*** (Acts 8:17)

What can we learn from this 'short story' from Acts? A LOT! "By evangelizing to the Samaritans, an ethnic group historically at odds (enemies!) of the Jews, Peter and John give us a model of a church eager to reach out to outsiders, following the Spirit's leading. The Holy Spirit

is a Spirit of **inclusion, unifying** God's people across their **differences.**" **'Unifying... across...Differences.'** Hmmm. Something we could sure use more of today. A task for which we certainly need a power greater than our own...

But regardless of the 'differences' that they had, more importantly they SHARED a common faith. And recognizing that the Samaritans faith journey would be incomplete, weak, powerless, unless someone reached out to them, Peter and John WENT TO them. Made the effort to 'go the extra mile' in service to their sisters and brothers. And when they got there, they PRAYED for them. Lifted them up to the throne of grace and empowerment. And then LAID HANDS ON THEM, through which they received power much greater than their own.

Friends, who of your fellow believers needs YOU? Who might you be being called to 'go that extra mile' for? One who is incomplete, weak, and needs someone to PRAY for them; to give them strength. Perhaps someone in your very own household. Remember that we are ALL, in our own ways, "wounded healers." Our ministry to others is profoundly impacted by the way others minister to US. As we take the time to lift up others to that same 'throne of grace and empowerment'... as we lay hands and hearts on other 'messengers' of God... they will receive a power much greater than their own. And in so doing, we will have proven ourselves to be 'messengers' worthy of the One who sends us. The God from whom we too wish to hear, 'This is my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.

How do we continue to remind ourselves of our baptismal identity as 'ministers' and 'messengers' of the 'Messiah,' Jesus Christ? Through those 'holy' pursuits, of course... of worship, of Bible Study, of prayer, of service to ALL, particularly to 'the least of these, our brethren.' But also perhaps in the more 'mundane,' everyday practices of life. How about when you take a shower or bath? Or when you wash your hands? (Which these days I HOPE is pretty often!) When you consider the importance of daily hygiene... the need to be cleansed of the impurities, of the illness, the 'disease' that can be so detrimental to our physical health... may we also be mindful of the importance of being cleansed spiritually. Of how the blood of Jesus washes away our sin, and replaces the 'dis-ease' of our fragile, troubled lives with the HOPE and PEACE that only God can bring. Just like that clean, pure water we take for granted whenever we turn on the faucet, so too can we take for granted the cleansing purity of our God: Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. So, the next time you put your hands in the sink or body in the tub, may your heart and mind NOT merely think, "It's just a little water".

CHARGE: You may have noticed ... or NOT... that in all the songs we sang today, there was not ONE single reference to the 'keyword' for today's worship: "**baptism.**" And while that was not a conscious decision, perhaps it was 'Divine providence.' Because no matter how important it is to remember our identity as believers at Table and Font, they must never take the place of 'remembering' the One to whom they point: JESUS. The One who both **washes us clean** and **fills us with His Spirit**. Not just for a few minutes on a Sunday... but EVERYDAY. He IS the "Precious Lord **hears our cry...takes our hand... leads us on... helps us stand.**"

As you and I go forth to live out our baptismal identity as followers of Jesus let us never forget that we do not go alone... as we take the hand of the Precious Lord who leads us home,' KNOW that the SPIRIT of the Living God ...