

BAPTISM - MORE THAN GETTING “DONE”
Sermon for Epiphany 1: Is. 43:1-7, Lk 3:15-17, 21-22
LPC, 1/10/10/

This hasn't happened lately, but every so often in my ordained career I've been approached by a young couple who want to get their baby “done.” They are, of course referring to baptism.

I don't mean to be too critical of these parents. They want something good for their child. They are expressing, at some level, a desire to be connected with the church. It just gives me pause to speak of a child being “done” as if he or she were a steak.

To speak of having a baby “done” does not do justice to the idea of baptism. So it seems a good thing for the people of God to review, periodically, what baptism is and is not. Baptism, put plainly, is initiation into the Christian faith.

Like all sacraments, baptism is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The outward and visible sign of baptism is the water, which either immerses the person, or, more commonly in the Episcopal Church, is sprinkled on the person's head. The water symbolizes cleansing, for obvious reasons.

In baptism, we are cleansed from sin. In the case of infants, who haven't yet had much chance to sin willfully, to be baptized is to be cleansed of sin's hold on us. Of course this symbolism holds true for adults too. After baptism, a person will almost certainly commit sin. But baptism means that sin cannot hold us. Repentance, forgiveness, and freedom from past sin are always available to the baptized person.

Besides cleansing, the water of baptism also symbolizes death. Did you realize that? This symbolism is much more apparent in the case of baptism by immersion. Going under the water is a sort of burial. In baptism, a person is buried as Christ died and was buried. In emerging from the water, the person is lifted out, resurrected from death as Christ was resurrected from death. In baptism we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ.

So much for the outward and visible sign of the water and its more obvious symbolism. What is the inward and spiritual grace of baptism?

Ah! This is the good stuff! If baptism were just about cleansing from sin and the symbolism of dying with Christ, I wonder if we'd get any takers. But there is a much more positive side to baptism. Baptism is a covenant of love between God and God's child. Baptism is in fact a formal adoption ceremony where God publicly claims a child, or an adult, as God's own.

Just as baptism is an act of identifying with the death and resurrection of Jesus, baptism is also an act of identifying with the baptism of Jesus himself, when the heavens opened, and, as we heard in today's lesson, a voice came from heaven saying, “You are

my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” When we are baptized, God says that to us, too. Imagine hearing those words in your own ears!

The awesome beauty of this phenomenon can only be described in poetry. Fortunately, the prophet Isaiah provides us with the words:

Thus says the Lord,
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior,...
Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you....

A person would be blessed to hear such words from a parent, or a spouse. But the speaker this time is no one short of the almighty God. The creator of the universe says these words to us, to each of us personally.

Now, I often get asked, why do we baptize infants who can't speak for themselves? There is certainly a lot to be said for "believer's baptism." Presumably when only committed persons capable of a mature affirmation of faith are baptized, you have a stronger, more intentional membership in your church.

But one of the things we believe about the inward and spiritual grace of baptism is that it's all about God, not us. Grace is God's pure gift. It can't be deserved by a person no matter how committed and mature they are. The grace of God is freely given. We can't earn it. We may as well baptize infants who can't possibly have earned God's grace and love just as they can't possibly have sinned.

Baptism does not make God's love happen any more than the sacrament of marriage makes love happen between a husband and wife. Marriage does not create love between a husband and wife; marriage witnesses to a love that is already there, and makes that love covenantal.

Likewise, baptism does not make God's love or approval fall on a person. Baptism witnesses to the love of God that is already there and makes it covenantal. God vows the continuous caring described by the Prophet Isaiah. In return, we make our own vows, in the form of the Baptismal Covenant.

In gratitude to a God who created us, called us by name, loves us lavishly, and walks with us through fire and water, let us together renew our baptismal covenant now.