

“Remembering our Baptisms”

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Text: Matthew 3:13-17

I remember my baptism. I was baptized around the age of 14 at First Christian Church in Junction City, Oregon. I was not particular religious at that time. As I shared before, my family was a mixture of church and non-church. Yet, my parents felt it important that I attend the pastor’s classes being offered at the local Christian Church and be baptized. Many of my friends had been baptized and I was in a period of time of some spiritual reflection and so I agreed. I attended about half of the sessions and have no memory of what was said or taught. I did want to be baptized and followed through with my time just prior to Easter Sunday.

Ironically looking back I cannot say that this was a time of great spiritual commitment. Mostly I was baptized because of family desire (mostly my father’s side) and by peer pressure. Yet, I remember my baptism. I remember the cold water, the feel of the

wet jeans pressed against my legs, the feeling I had when I emerged from the water---all of it. I remember even though after my baptism I dropped out of church and did not return until my final year in high school, in another town, and at another place. Strange that I remember my baptism at all---but I do.

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In Matthew we read of the story when Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized. John was a hell-fire preacher who was stirring up the masses with his message of repentance and his condemnation of the religious establishment. Hundreds were coming to him and as a sign of their commitment were baptized.

Baptism was part of the Jewish tradition. If a non-Jew wanted to become Jewish they were baptized as a sign of cleansing and renewal. The church picked up the practice both from their Jewish roots and from the stories of Jesus being baptized. There is no indication that the disciples of Jesus were baptized but it is evident that many early Christians were baptized as a sign of their commitment to the way of Jesus.

Underneath this tradition of Jesus' baptism is historical truth. There are many reasons that the writers would ignore the baptism of Jesus and no reason to create the story for effect. The baptism of Jesus has been a problem for the church through the ages. If, as the church proclaims, Jesus is without sin then why did he feel the need to be baptized for the "remission of sins"? Thus because the story creates more problems than it solves it is most likely there because it is true---Jesus chose to be baptized by John who baptized for the remission of sins.

Through the ages persons have tried to answer this question by various arguments. Some say that Jesus only was baptized as a symbol---a leader first doing what he would ask others to do. Others say that Jesus' baptism was to affirm the ministry of John the Baptist. There was for some time a conflict between some followers of Jesus and followers of John as to who was the Messiah. This conflict is reflected in various texts that go out the way to have John say that he is the lesser. Yet, all of these types of arguments are just what they are---trying to explain something that

theologically is a problem for some. Suffice it say that Jesus was baptized because Jesus wanted to be baptized, needed to be baptized, and felt it important.

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It is tragic that baptism has been a source of division and even violence within the church. I am part of a denomination that was in the middle of that conflict. Early on Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), decided to break with the Presbyterian practice of infant baptism followed by a later confirmation. His break was because he abandoned the idea of original sin condemning young unbaptized children to condemnation. He could not conceive of a loving God casting children into hell just because they were not baptized. His break also was because he deduced that in the early church most of those baptized were adults and the method used was immersion. Ironically Campbell broke with his Presbyterian roots because he felt they were too restrictive and then turned around and built a movement that quickly focused on the method of baptism as the

main determining factor in salvation. Early Disciple preachers fanned out declaring that the only valid form of baptism was immersion, that if one had not been immersed they have not been baptized and if one is not baptized one can never enter into heaven. At the end of his life there is an indication that Alexander Campbell regretted his restrictive position and wrote that the church should welcome all persons no matter how they had been baptized.

Arguments about the timing or form or method of baptism miss the whole point. Baptism is a sign of a spiritual commitment. It is an act that is done on our behalf and later confirmed or done by us in response to our commitment to God. Making baptism an end in itself is both theologically shortsighted and sinful. The goal of faith is always the same----to reach God. The method and path we choose is not as important as the goal.

Yet, baptism remains an important “sacred moment” in the lives of many. Although I do not believe that baptism is essential for ones relationship with God I would never discourage and in

fact encourage persons of faith to be baptized and/or to confirm their commitment to God. The reason is very simple. As human beings it is important for us to publically acknowledge commitments. So we hold marriage ceremonies that offer couples an opportunity to publically proclaim their commitment and love. We hold ceremonies at graduation that have traditions that date back generations such as moving a tassel from one side of a mortar board hat to the other. Graduation occurs at a moment of transition in our lives. At ceremonies we swear in judges, juries, witnesses, presidents, council persons and in a few moments we will hold a commitment service for those who have agreed to serve as officers and members of our boards. Such events mark important times and give us an opportunity to publically declare our commitments. Baptism is an opportunity to declare our commitment to God or to declare our commitment to raise our children within a Christian home in the hope that they will affirm that act in later years.

By “remembering” our baptisms and celebrating the moments of commitment we remind ourselves of where we have been and where we are going. Remembering and celebrating important events in life help keep us on the path to joy.

It is so easy to forget. It is easy to forget the vows we make at the time of marriage, the commitment we make to a friend or loved one, the commitment we make to God, and the commitment we make to ourselves. Life has way of crowding in, confusing, and making us so busy that we all forget.

We rise early in the morning with the determination that we will be spend this day being kind and fulfilling our commitment to eat less and exercise more. We arrive at our place of work whether in an office, by a ditch, or by the washing machine. In a moment something happens. The dryer breaks, our car breaks down, the boss tells us we have to go out of town now---the same day we committed to be at our child’s performance, a customer is rude, we are hit by too much and before we know it that determination in

the morning has vanished. We grab a donut, postpone our exercise time, find ourselves angry and irritable and before we know it our commitments are memory. At the end of the day we are angry at ourselves for our lack of strength, or our lack of resolve---we feel guilty---a failure. Each cycle of broken commitment makes it harder the next day.

There was a show on television the other night about attaining “happiness”. Scientist are discovering, according to the show on “ABC, 20/20” on Friday, January 11, 2008, that about half of our ability to be happy is determined by genetics, 10% by life circumstances and 40% we can control. The show lifted up people who had decided to be positive, decided to be joyful and decided to be happy. It took hard work and commitment but they were able to make changes in their brain patterns that are measureable. They were able to be happy---not at all times----but to be happy in spite of what might be happening around them.

Religions have discovered this and known this for centuries. Our tradition tells us to “pray without ceasing”, to “set our minds

on heavenly things” and to “seek the higher actions of kindness, gratitude, forgiveness, and gentleness in our living.” Jesus said he came to lead us into life---an abundant life. I believe that in a dramatic way Jesus and now the church does hold the keys to the kingdom—but the kingdom is within us. The key to joy and peace lie not in having everything we want or desire---as the advertisers declare but in finding our center and our peace in God. If one reads the heart and soul of the scriptures we can detect the loving movement of God.

God conveys to us that we are OK—that we are loved. “God so loved the world” the writer of John declares and goes on to assure us that no matter what we have done or who we are we are loved by God. Later Paul would declare that one no longer needs the restrictions of the law to convince them that God loves them but in Christ all can know of God’s love and be HEALED---which is what the word salvation means. All the rest, the lists, the beatitudes, the stories are to help us grow spiritually—to become what God knows we can be----a child of God.

Too often it is we who get in the way of that. Some Jewish people lost that kernel of truth in a maze of laws and rituals and rules that they created over centuries. The church loses that kernel of joy when we add policy and doctrine to policy and doctrine. We argue and our blood pressure rises over who can join the church, which is welcome at church, which of form of baptism, music, or communion is acceptable to God. We have done it and continue to do so. And when we do we rob ourselves of the grace and truth of the simple message that Jesus brought and lived out.

That message is found in the voice. We read the voice as directed only to Jesus and in the context that is an accurate interpretation. Yet, is it only Jesus who is beloved by God? Is it not each of us?

What was it that Jesus did that caused that awareness either within him or within others? He stepped forward. He made a commitment. He took a stand. He declared his faith and the direction of his life. Jesus was baptized because that moment was

important in his own spiritual journey. Our commitments, whether formal or informal, are important in our spiritual journey.

We indeed must make that commitment daily even moment to moment. I have shared a story written by a person of a different religious tradition but a story that illustrates this point. The author writes that she was on a long plane flight and grew very stiff and uncomfortable. She stood up and began to walk down the aisle. Her first thoughts were focused on her uncomfortable feeling, feeling sorry and even angry that she was uncomfortable. Then she remembered her commitment---her meditation---her mantra. She remembered that her religion taught that life is sometimes comfortable and sometimes it is not. She remembered that we cannot control the circumstances around us but we can control how we respond to suffering or being uncomfortable. In a moment she said what we would call a calming prayer. She then noticed how uncomfortable everyone else was on that flight. She saw a man, asleep squirming to find a position of comfort—a woman with head phones trying to zone out the pain. Suddenly, she said she

felt “in community” with all the others were just as uncomfortable as she. That remembering brought her peace even though her legs still hurt and her back was still stiff and even knowing there was many more hours ahead of her.

Remembering our baptism or those important moments in which God has spoken to us or we have felt the presence of God or felt the love of another can keep us focused. Remembering our baptisms can help us through the wilderness and remind us in every moment that we are beloved by God. Today we are invited to remember and to be encouraged.