

Baptized into the Family of God

Camp Cotubic
August 14, 2016

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” ⁴⁰And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.⁴⁴And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:36-47 (ESV)

This morning is a great cause of celebration. Each year at our annual Camp Cotubic retreat we conclude our worship service with the baptisms of individuals who have requested it. I am not sure that in our human minds we can truly grasp the importance and significance of the baptisms.

Jesus tells us in his three consecutive parables found in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, that there will be great rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner who repents. Think about that: this morning as we celebrate the baptisms of these four individuals, there will be great rejoicing in heaven for each and every one of you!

Think about what it took to get you to this place: First it took your parents being born, and their parents, and their parents, and back and back and back, all the way to Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden. Then it took your parents coming together, united in marriage, wanting to have children.

Then, think about how blessed you are to have been raised by parents who are committed to the Christian faith. So committed to it that they agreed to bring you up in the Christian faith, at home and in a church.

Think of all the teaching you have received over the years – from the Bible stories as a kid, to memorizing Scripture verses, to the Christmas musicals, Vacation Bible School, Sunday school, to church almost every Sunday morning, JYF for a couple of you and MYF for another. It's really pretty amazing that you are here this morning.

But there is an even more important reason that you are here this morning. But God!

The words of King David from our Call to Worship this morning, Psalm 139:¹ *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.*

² *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.* ⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.*

⁵ *You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me...*

¹³ *For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴ *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

¹⁶ *Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*

For those that are being baptized this morning, and for all of us, we need to remember that though the influence of our parents in being raised in the faith is so very important, our family backgrounds, growing up in the church, our own decision to accept Jesus as our Savior and Lord (I prefer Savior and Lord instead of Lord and Savior because we need to recognize Jesus as our Savior before we can accept Him as Lord) – but in the end it is mostly the work of God.

Our passage in Acts this morning says, "For everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." In Matthew 22 it says "for many are called but few are chosen." Those who are chosen are the ones who repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Where God's initiative leaves off and man's response picks up is one of the great mysteries of our faith. But make no mistake about it, it is mostly God!

Throughout almost all of Christian history, in just about every Christian denomination, baptism is viewed as a foundational event of our Christian faith journey. Jesus commanded us to do it and even participated in it himself, when there appeared to be absolutely no reason for him to do so, especially as being symbolic for the cleansing of sins, since he had none. Jesus was initiating the act of Christian baptism as a sign of entrance into the family of God. We don't truly become children (sons & daughters) of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, until we are baptized.

While throughout Christian history and in just about every Christian denomination, baptism has been viewed as a foundational event, there have been great differences, debates and even conflicts over questions like – is baptism essential to salvation, when should it be done, how old should the person be, when is the appropriate (or exact and perfect) moment to do it, and how should we do it? Should it be immersion, or is sprinkling or pouring okay?

How much conflict has different ideas over baptism caused? Well, for many of our Mennonite (Anabaptist) forefathers and foremothers, it resulted in torture and death. Some of them had their tongues cut out so they couldn't confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, some of them were burned at the stake, and some of them were drowned. I think it begs the question – how seriously do we take our Christian faith? If any of us were at the point of being called to be baptized this morning – like Leah, Emma, Hayden, and Ethan, and we knew we faced the very good possibility of torture and/or death – would we do it?

As with many (if not most) other Christian denominations, for Mennonites, baptism is closely linked to salvation. But the act of baptism in and of itself is not a salvific act. The actual act of baptism doesn't save us anymore than coming to church each and every Sunday of our lives saves us. Baptism in water is viewed as a sign (or a symbol) that one has already been baptized by the Holy Spirit. It has been viewed not so much as one ritual or act (or as

some churches refer to it, a sacrament), or a single moment of decision (the precise date of “giving one’s heart to Jesus”), but it is characterized by several things:

1. Our Christian faith is not a onetime decision, but a lifetime journey. Baptism comes toward the beginning of that journey.
2. Baptism is not just an individual act, or just a commitment to Jesus, but also a commitment to full participation in the (and a) community of faith, “the family of God,” otherwise known as the church.
3. Baptism is a commitment and willingness to follow Jesus’ teachings in every area of our life, every day, otherwise referred to as “discipleship”.

The act of baptism symbolizes all those things. It is like a marriage vow. There is both a very serious, and a very joyful, public statement of commitment implied in the vow. Mennonites have always believed that baptism should be reserved for those who are old enough to understand the nature of the decision and are ready to commit themselves fully to the journey of Christian faith. Since we all mature at different levels, at different ages, in every area of life, it is no different in the area of our Christian journey. There is no right or exact age. Throughout all of history God has called people to himself at all ages – from young to very old.

I was thinking throughout the week about how my message this morning might fit with our current series on how to handle conflict in a Christian way. Does it fit? And I think it does. Just as we don’t get to choose the biological family we are born into, we don’t really get to choose the church family we are reborn (or baptized) into. Yes, today we can church hop – going from one church to another, from one denomination to another – or today the preference is “non-denominational” – looking for that one perfect church, but in reality we are “one Christian family in God.” There is no perfect church or perfect church family. But God does call us to journey in the Christian faith “together.”

It is no coincidence that in our passage from Acts this morning, right after Peter tells the first Christians to “*repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, **everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself,***” we find them not only devoting (committing) themselves to Jesus and to the apostles’ teaching, but to one another, “to

the fellowship," "together." There is no Christianity apart from doing it "together." That is where we learn to "bear with one another in love," to resolve conflict in a Christian way, to forgive, and to love the way God calls us to love. To love those who we disagree with. To love even our enemies. I know you find it hard to believe that sometimes your enemies might even be part of the church. ☺

That might very well be the most important part of being the church. I have been challenged recently by all the different things that we are supposed to do as a church. We're supposed to reach out to others – the lost and the hurting; we're supposed to share the gospel, we're supposed to worship God in spirit and in truth – as best we can; we're supposed to make disciples and become better disciples ourselves; we're supposed to respond to the needs of people – not only in our own community but around the world. I don't know about you, but I find it all a little overwhelming. That's on a good day! On most days I find it a lot overwhelming! Which is why we're supposed to do it together. Actually we're more than supposed to do it together, we're called by God to do it together!

I would like to challenge us this morning with the question – how good are we doing at "doing it together?" Most importantly, how good are we doing it together as the Oak Grove Family of God? Do we let our likes and dislikes determine what activities we participate in? Do we allow our differences to dictate when and how we worship? Are we "one body," "one church family" in Christ, or are we just 200 individuals who have committed ourselves to Jesus Christ who often go in different directions and sometimes come together to participate in the things that I/we like? We're not really at one end of the spectrum as opposed to the other, we're somewhere in between. How are you doing at moving us from the end of being just a bunch of individuals (which is what our culture is all about) to the end of being "one family in Christ"?

The West Liberty community is a very unique and special place. Certainly, like most small towns it has its disadvantages – everybody knows each other's business, or we think we know each other's business, or we want to know each other's business. There seems to be a lot of gossip, and we have a hard time respecting and loving those that are different than us. But there are a lot of good things as well.

On Friday afternoon a man from our community suffered a very serious and life threatening accident when he was run over by a bush hog. The response from the community has been truly amazing. All the people reaching out for his wife and family offering to help, some people going down to the hospital in Dayton to offer their support, lots of people and all the churches praying for him, several different pastors from the local churches visiting him. Actually the full time chaplains at the hospital were surprised. The two that I met both said "this doesn't happen very often, where we see this much support for one family."

While some have wondered where the family's faith is at, I am here to tell you they do have a Christian faith. I know the pastor who baptized the man many years ago, which brings us full circle to where we started. The importance of that act symbolizing our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross, and nothing else.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

Our life here on earth is only for a limited time. None of us knows how long that time is going to be. Only God knows how long it is going to be, *all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.* We might be able to speed that day up by our actions and some of the things we choose to do, but we're not going beyond the days God has ordained for each of us.

So, the most important question is, "are you in the right place with God right now and will you be in the right place with God whenever that day may come?" "Repent and be baptized." "Believe and be baptized" and you will be saved!

Let us pray: