

Homily – A Baptism of Connection

Rob Keim

January 10, 2016 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

As a child I remember chanting, *“rain, rain go away. Come again another day. Rain, rain, go away. Come again another day.”* The rain was getting in the way of an activity or was just uncomfortably wet, and I wanted it to go away. However, since the drought began four years ago, this is not a chant we say much these days.

For the past many months we have been praying for rain. As water, we know that rain is the source of life, and we pray for life. At least on our planet, there are not many living things that are disconnected from water. So in a way, water connects us to all other living things. Water touches everything.

Today we have a Gospel story about water with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Sometimes we forget that John did not invent baptism. Two thousand years ago, baptism, or ritual washing with water, was already performed in the Temple in Jerusalem, and it was also practiced by some of the more rigid sects like the Essenes.

Before John baptism with water was used as a way to clean away the unhealthy things and to show that a person was now separated from the dirtiness of other people. Baptism was a way to separate clean Jews from unclean Gentiles, but it was also a way to separate clean Jews from unclean Jews. Baptism created two groups of people – the clean ones and the unclean ones. While there were some medical benefits to being clean, the ritual cleansing of baptism would separate one from those who were less than.

Even today, we still have some of this way of thinking. Baptism washes away sin. Baptism cleanses. Baptism allows one to leave behind all of those that are still unsaved. Baptism allows us to join the club of those who are already life's winners.

In the old way of thinking baptism let us think we were better than others, and at our worst we would only surround ourselves with others that were also life's better people.

Sick one, different one go away. Come again another day. Poor one, different one go away. Come again another day.

This way of thinking about baptism is confusing to me, for John baptized Jesus, and Jesus didn't need to be cleansed. He didn't need to be separate from those who were unclean. We know that Jesus was always reaching out to the outcast.

Now there is another way to think about baptism that fits better with Jesus. It is a way of thinking that goes with the characteristic of water that I mentioned earlier. Water connects all living things.

We can think of baptism as a way to connect or reconnect us back to all other living things. We can think of baptism as a decision by a person or by a parent, to leave behind the ways of life that separate us from one another.

We do so many things that disconnect us from God and from one another, and baptism is a beautiful way to reject that way of living. However, baptism is not just a way to connect us to people that are already like us, or to things that are pure. Baptism is a connection to the widow and the orphan. It is a link to the sick and the poor. It is a bond to the slave and the foreigner. Aren't all of these things that Jesus did with his baptism?

First John the Baptist, and then Jesus turned the whole notion of baptism on end and changed it.

Do you think of baptism in the old way or in the new way?

For me spirituality is about connections and relationships. Spirituality is about being in healthy relationship with God, with others, with oneself, and with the rest of non-human Creation. Water connects all living things, and the waters of baptism are a spiritual reconnection. It is a way to turn away from a way of life that deadens our souls. This beauty of baptism can take our breath away and replaces it with the breath of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a way to take on the identity of Christ – to be inclusive, and to build relationships with those that are different. And, taking on the identity of Christ does not mean embracing yet another identity. Instead, it means laying down the various identities that would define us, and taking on a strong profound solidarity of humanness that is shared with everyone.

Imagine a world in which our churches embraced this newer perspective on baptism. Imagine a world where we let go of nationalism, racism, classism, sexism and every form of hostility. Imagine a baptism that connects us to those of other faith traditions, and even dare I say, to those that have not yet been baptized. Baptism connects us through Christ to everyone, and that is what we also re-embrace every time we reaffirm our baptism.

As I conclude today let me share a more appropriate chant for the rain. The Navajos tell of the Male-Rain and of the Female-Rain. The Male-Rain is the Storm, with thunder and lightning; The Female-Rain is the gentle shower. The two Rains meet on

the mountains, and from their union springs all vegetation upon the earth. The Rain-Mountain is a distant mountain west of Zuni.

This Navaho chant shows how we are all connected and brought to life by water.

“Far as man can see,
Through the pollen,
Comes the rain,
Through the pollen blest,
Comes the rain with me.
All in pollen hidden

Comes the rain,
From the Rain-Mount,
Comes the rain with me.
Rain-Mount far away,
Comes the rain,
Comes the rain with me.
Far as man can see

Comes the rain,
O'er the corn,
Comes the rain with me.
O'er the corn, tall corn,
Comes the rain,
Comes the rain with me.

`Mid the lightnings,
`Mid the lightning zigzag,
`Mid the lightning flashing,
Comes the rain,
Comes the rain with me.

`Mid the swallows.
`Mid the swallows blue
Chirping glad together,
Comes the rain,
Comes the rain with me.”