

Homily – The Sacrament of Baptism

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Yesterday, several of us from St. Barnabas were in the Bay Area for the consecration of our new bishop, the Rt. Rev. Lucinda Ashby. On Friday, the clergy of the diocese had a lunch with Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. He is certainly an inspirational, holy man.

Bishop Michael spent 90 minutes answering our questions, and the most interesting question he received was “what is up with Megan and Harry.” You may remember that two years ago, Bishop Michael preached an amazing sermon at the wedding of Megan and Prince Harry. Bishop Michael said he had no idea what they were up to, but he said Megan and Prince Harry were very independent people who know how to make their own path in life.

Yesterday, the ordination ceremony for Bishop Lucinda took about two and half hours. There were probably one hundred priests and deacons and another thirty bishops.

As Episcopalians we layer in a lot of ceremony and ritual to the consecration of a bishop. Most of it is tradition, and really has little to do with a basic sacrament. The laying on of hands to create a new baby bishop only took about five minutes. But, after months of preparation, and a two and a half hour ceremony, American Episcopal bishop number one thousand one hundred and twenty-five was created. I look forward to working with Bishop Lucinda for the next many years. And, her first official visit as a bishop will be to us here at St. Barnabas in mid-February.

During her visit Bishop Lucinda will do her first Confirmations. Confirmation is another one of our Sacraments, and our Book of Common Prayer has the following definition of this Sacrament. *"In the course of their Christian development, those baptized at an early age may, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and to receive the laying on of hands by the bishop. In addition, those baptized as adults may want to make a public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism in the presence of a bishop and to receive the laying on of hands."*

That is quite the definition, and I like to simplify the definition. For me, Confirmation, and the associated Receiving and Reaffirmation of Confirmation, are a public statement that a person wants to embrace God's love and take a next step in being part of our community here at St. Barnabas. Notice, I didn't use the word member,

since I think that word makes us sound like a club. Instead, Confirmation is just being part of this particular community of followers of Jesus.

We have five other Sacraments as well. And, they are baptism, Eucharist, marriage, reconciliation or confession, and holy unction, also known as healing prayer and last rites.

A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.

Again, the seven sacraments are ordination of clergy, confirmation, baptism, Eucharist, marriage, reconciliation or confession, and holy unction, also known as healing prayer and last rites.

Now, today we have the story of a Sacrament. We have a Gospel story about 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.

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. 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?

Now, for me spirituality is about connections and relationships. Spirituality is about being in healthy relationship with God, with others, with self, 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 of 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.

And, let us now do that. Let us reaffirm our baptism by turning to page 292 of the red Book of Common Prayer.