

## BAPTISM: AN ACT OF GOD

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

LHUMC 1/26/14

Baptism Series #3 of 3

### I. Introduction

- A. I was with a group of pastors a while back and we got on to the topic of “classes we’d wish we’d had at seminary but didn’t”
  - 1. Probably no matter what your line of work is, there are moments when you think to yourself “I wasn’t ready for this” or worse, “I have no idea what I’m doing here”.
  - 2. Because no matter what we do, there is no way to be trained for every eventuality.
  - 3. So our list included classes like:
    - a) “How to not get lost in a hospital”
    - b) “How to do Children’s Times in worship”
    - c) “How to say prayers at \_\_\_\_\_” (Rotary club, town council meetings, Memorial Day ceremonies, etc.) without offending anyone.”
    - d) “Boiler Maintenance 101”
- B. We all did agree on one thing we did receive lots of training in, either at seminary or in denominational workshops, and that was conflict management.
  - 1. For it seems as if those who run seminaries and denominations understand the reality that from day one, that whenever two or more have gathered in the church, there has always been the chance that even though Jesus is there, people are going to argue.
  - 2. And so over the years, I have attended more workshops and read more books on how to deal with conflict in the church than you could shake a stick at.
  - 3. That doesn’t mean I’m necessarily good at dealing with it when it happens, it just means that I should be.
- C. But one thing I’ve realized over the years is that the best textbooks on dealing with conflict in the church were written a long time ago, and everything since are poor imitations.
  - 1. I would argue that there are still no better resource on this topic than 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. Why?
    - a) First, is the fact that that church in Corinth was a real mess.

- 1) If that had been a United Methodist Church, it would have been one of those churches where they have a different pastor every year and the District Superintendent had them on speed dial.
- 2) They argued about all kinds of things
- 3) So it was a perfect case study for conflict in the church.
- b) Second, Paul was such a master at seeing things for what they really were.
  - 1) He understood the reality of any conflict in any organization, that what you see on the surface is almost always a symptom of deeper issues.
  - 2) And the Corinthian Church had a boatload of symptoms—things like poor stewardship, and the rich members of the congregation treating the poor members really badly, and bragging as to who the pastor was when you joined the church, and one group of folks acting like their spiritual gifts were more important than everyone else's, etc. etc. etc.
  - 3) In today's passage, Paul has been away from Corinth for a while (perhaps much to his relief), and he gets a note from a family in the church that in his absence, things have gone from bad to worse.
  - 4) And so Paul writes back, and in these letters we see how he is able to cut through all the junk, to what the real issues really were.
  - 5) He understood what every pastor learns pretty quickly that sometimes the deeper issues are even theological misunderstandings.
  - 6) And today, we see clearly that at least part of the deeper problem there in Corinth was a misunderstanding about baptism.
  - 7) Specifically, apparently the people were placing huge importance on who baptized them. If I was baptized by Peter, for example, that made me better than you, if you were baptized by someone else. Because Peter was there with Jesus, after all. As one commentator says, they were "creating ripples in the pool of baptism by name-dropping." (Dr. Ozzie Smith, *What are We Doing Here?* [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org). 1/23/11)
  - 8) And out of this significant theological misunderstanding came all of these bad behaviors.

- D. And I find it fascinating how Paul responds here—it’s actually kind of humorous—he says basically “Thank goodness I didn’t baptize very many of you—in fact I don’t even really remember who I did baptize.”
1. That seems so “un-pastorlike” .
  2. When I baptize someone, I never forget them—I even write their names in this pastoral record book that I have so I won’t.
  3. But then as I’ve thought about Paul’s situation, I’m realizing that maybe he was actually being a really good pastor in saying what he did. That he knew exactly what he was doing.
  4. Maybe that was his way of reminding the Corinthians that when it came to baptism, they had it all wrong.
  5. And because they did, it was leading to all of these other problems.
  6. When he seemed to not care very much about his role in baptizing them, maybe what he was really trying to remind them was the reality that it really doesn’t matter for anyone who the pastor is that does the baptizing.
  7. Because when you obsess about that, you are forgetting that baptism is always an act of God, and not humans.
- II. Remember I said a couple of weeks ago that that phrase would keep coming up—“baptism is an act of God.” Today we see in the Corinthian church what can happen when people forget that. We see further that that misunderstanding can become the tip of a very unpleasant iceberg. And so Paul is reminding them in his own unique way that because it’s an act of God, it doesn’t matter who baptizes us. And when you take the idea that baptism is an act of God, it goes even beyond that to some other realities as well. When we understand that , we also understand that there are other details of our baptism that don’t matter much either.
- A. It doesn’t matter where we are baptized.
1. If it’s an act of God, then it doesn’t matter if we were baptized at the river, in a lake, at a tank, or at the font.
  2. Because to suggest that one place is better than another is to insert our own human opinion into the act of baptism by suggesting that somehow God is more present in that place than somewhere else.
- B. It doesn’t matter when we are baptized.
1. Which takes us back to our United Methodist understanding of infant baptism.
  2. Because when you baptize a baby, you are really stressing that baptism is God’s act and not our own.

3. Our founder John Wesley stressed what he called “prevenient grace”—a gift from God that is available to all persons.
  4. That would include infants of course, and so when we baptize them, we are recognizing that baptism, as a sign of God’s prevenient grace, really is an act of God.
  5. That God sees us all as his children, regardless of our age, or our understanding at that moment of baptism of what is happening to us as we officially join the family of God.
  6. Wesley was clear that when it comes to prevenient grace, you can’t go partway, it either is available to everyone or it isn’t, and when we baptize a baby, we are recognizing and celebrating that it is.
- C. It doesn’t matter how we are baptized.
1. Whether we are sprinkled, dipped or dunked, if it’s really an act of God, it doesn’t matter.
  2. If we see the water as symbolic of God’s and God’s grace acting in our baptism, it’s all good—whether it’s a few drops or a whole river.
  3. If we see it as an act of God, we understand that we are putting limits on God by suggesting that He might prefer one way over another.
- D. And most of all, we United Methodists understand that since it is an act of God, once is always enough.
1. My all time favorite baptism story that I think I’ve shared with you before is told by Lawrence Stookey in his book about baptism where he tells of meeting a woman who had a unique story to tell.
    - a) To make a long story short, it goes something like this—this woman was born in England, and was taken by her grandmother to be baptized as a baby at the local Methodist church. Her father was a member of the Church of England who held the Methodists in low regard, so he took her to the village Anglican church where she was baptized again by the priest there. Meanwhile, her mother became a member of the Salvation Army, and didn’t think much of the Anglicans or the Methodists, so she took her to the Army chapel where she was presented for a spiritual baptism as was their practice. Eventually her family moved to the midwestern United States where they began to attend another Methodist church. The pastor there was a kind of maverick, who didn’t agree with the whole idea of infant baptism, so when she joined the church as a teenager, he baptized her yet again. (that’s four baptisms, if

you're counting). When she became an adult, she fell in love with and married a Southern Baptist. Her husband was nice enough to tell her that he thought four times was enough, but when she was hired to play the organ in his Southern Baptist church, the deacons insisted that she get a good dunking, since the four previous times, she'd never been "done" that way, and in that Southern Baptist church at least, that was the only way. For them "unimmersed hands could not play the Lord's songs." And so for a fifth time, she was baptized. (Lawrence Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*, p. 11)

- b) As I pondered that story again, I realized that story could have taken place in Corinth. When you forget that baptism is an act of God, you don't just get conflict like you had in Corinth, you get stories like this one.
2. As a United Methodist pastor, (unlike that guy in the story, and rest assured, nowadays he would never get ordained in our denomination), one of my charges is that I am not to baptize anyone again.
  - a) If a person comes to me to be baptized, my first question is usually "have you been baptized before?" If the answer is "yes", then I might perform a rite of "baptismal remembrance" (and there are many meaningful ways to do that) but I would not perform another "baptism" for that person.
  - b) Because our understanding is that since baptism is an act of God, to baptize someone again means that we are saying that somehow God got it wrong the first time.
  - c) Which seems a little presumptuous, doesn't it?

### III. Conclusion

- A. So to tie it all together and to sum it all up, it all goes back to where we started, with Jesus as he came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. In that story, we find everything we need to know and everything we believe about baptism.
  1. We understand that through his submission to John, Jesus teaches us that baptism is an act of submission to God's will, and that in the servanthood that comes from that act of submitting ourselves to God, we come to true righteousness, or right relationship with God and with the world.
  2. We understand that when the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove, that same Holy Spirit comes to us at

the moment of our baptism, reminding us that we, like Jesus, are baptized by water and the Spirit.

3. And in it all, we understand like John did, that this is not a human act, when Jesus, or anyone else is baptized—it is an act of God.
- B. And then finally, as we heard God say to Jesus at that moment of baptism, “this is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him,” we know that God is pleased with us as his children when we give ourselves to God in baptism and join the family of faith.
- C. Lawrence Stookey: “Above all else, baptism is a gift from God...If it wasn’t, why make such a fuss about it?”
- D. Over these last couple of weeks, we’ve made a fuss about it simply because by doing so, hopefully we’ve remembered once again what a wonderful gift it truly is—to be, as we say in our United Methodist service of baptism “initiated and welcomed into Christ’s holy church... incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. **All this** is God’s gift, offered to us without price.” (*UM Hymnal* p. 35)