

“A United Methodist Theology of Baptism”

Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

January 11, 2015

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Today’s message has a mundane title: “A United Methodist Theology of Baptism.” But baptism is anything but mundane: in fact, it is the portal through which we enter the church. It so marks us as Christian disciples that it is a singular act of being claimed and set apart for God. It is said of the Protestant reformer, Fr. Martin Luther, that in times of doubt and despair he would tap his forehead and say “Baptismus sum” (“I am baptized.”)

Why preach on baptism especially when there is no baptism? First, today’s scriptures all point to it. Directly in Mark and Acts and indirectly in Genesis and the Psalm, God’s creating power and the re-creating power of baptism are clearly connected.

Second, part of my role as pastor is teacher: not only teaching families about baptism in their home prior to the Sacrament but also reminding us of the meaning of baptism. We, too, make baptismal promises. Speaking on this subject when no one is being baptized should remove any concern about the message being about a particular family or person.

Still, most of us recognize that some families appear for baptism only to disappear for weeks, months or years. There are many reasons for this but my hope, and third reason for this theme, is that this message will start a transparent and non-judgmental conversation about how we bridge the gap between baptism and being spiritually active in the life of this faith community.

I typically print my messages, and today is no different with copies in the back. Since I am preaching from notes what I say may not be exactly what I have written. But the text and the brochure in your bulletin are both there to reflect on later and to share with others.

I invite you to turn to page 33 in the Hymnal and look with me at the Baptismal Covenant I service. We'll start with a little "true and false." Some of the answers are in this liturgy or today's scriptures or the enclosed brochure, and some are not!

Baptism began in the Christian Church. **False:** both of today's New Testament readings point to the baptism of John the Baptist, which preceded Christianity.

Baptism is solely for the purpose of cleansing of us sin. **False:** if Jesus was "the sinless One," why would he need to be baptized as in today's reading from Mark? Both the Mark and Acts reading make clear, along with the introduction to baptism on page 33, that by the Sacrament we are "initiated into Christ's holy church, incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation, and [are] given new birth by water and the Spirit."

People may be baptized at any age. **True:** one of the reasons for differing baptismal practices in Christianity one's reading of the New Testament, but infant baptism as well as adult baptism is supported by scripture. Adult baptism can be at any age but is typically at the "age of consent," usually around age 13. This age reflects our Hebrew roots as it is the same age as when young men and women become bar mitzvahs or bat mitzvahs: "sons and daughters of the covenant." It is also why we confirm at age 13 since confirmation is a "confirming" of what was done for most of us as infants. That said, I have baptized people in their 60's and 70's.

The water used in baptism symbolizes life, cleansing, birth and, ironically, death. **True.** A Sunday School student was asked to explain baptism and they said "It's when the preacher holds you under water and you think about Jesus." Too much water and we drown. In baptism we symbolically die to our old selves. We need water for life. We are comprised of over 90% water. We need water to be cleansed. Water is present at birth and baptism gives us "new birth through water and the Spirit."

Parents are the only ones who make promises at baptism.
False: parents, godparents or sponsors, the congregation and God make promises, as you can see in the ritual.

Let's talk about the promises for parents and godparents on page 34. They are what I like to call the "Christian funnel." They start out big, things that any person of good will can affirm: renouncing wickedness, rejecting evil and repenting of sin.

Then they move to accountability: do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

Then they become specifically Christian: Do you confess Jesus as Savior and Lord of all?

Finally, they ask—in the case of infants—if those parents and godparents making these promises will nurture the children until they can decide for themselves to affirm Christian faith.

To this point, it is often asked "Who can be godparents?" United Methodists do not have rules, as some Christian traditions do, about who may serve as godparents, so, in theory, anyone. The deeper answer really has to do with personal integrity. Godparents should be those who will care about your child, take an active interest in your child, and specifically live out the spiritual commitments that are promised.

Someone may by now be thinking: "Well, what has this to do with me? I have no children of baptism age." Ah, let's look at the scriptures and page 35 in the Hymnal. As people of one Book, as John Wesley said, we affirm the truths of today's scripture. God created order out of chaos and gave us **light**, both literally in the natural creation and metaphorically in ethics and self-understanding, as Genesis asserts. We believe in God's **power**, reflected in our call to worship, our opening hymn and the readings from both Genesis and Psalm 29. We believe in **Jesus Christ**, for Christians the fullest expression of that light and power and who

received power by the Holy Spirit and God's confirmation that he was the Beloved as spoken of in Mark's Gospel. And we believe that Holy Spirit is conferred not only upon Christ Jesus, but upon all who are baptized as testified in the reading from Acts 19. Baptism not only turns **away** from sin but **toward** God's power.

At every baptism *you* also are asked to reaffirm your rejection of sin and commitment to Christ. *You* also are asked to include the baptismal family in your care. It's why we offer a nursery and Sunday School and youth fellowship and have cross bearers, acolytes, Bible bearers and youth readers. We provide these specific things to fulfill the vow to *"surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness that they may grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others."*

But we have a gap in our caring network: the pre-school years. Most, with or without children, recognize what those early years are like. There is no instruction manual for being a parent. In addition to the late nights, the feedings, the colic, the diapers, there is (hopefully) employment, sometimes by both parents. Sometimes there is only one parent, which makes the load doubly demanding. So, honestly, as much as it pains me to say it, the good intentions and lofty promises of baptism become casualties to the tough demands of life, and church attendance and worship participation take a back seat if they get a seat at all. Some of these families get disconnected for years.

Yet if we believe the human behaviorists—and I do—that our basic values are formed in the first five years of life, the role of faith is significant and we are not keeping our promise as the church if we are not reaching back to these families. Yes, of course, we could say they are responsible for fulfilling their vows, and to some extent that is true. But we don't take that attitude for other segments of our church, so why with young families?

It is true we already have a nursery and a pre-school Sunday School class. These are good and well-run. Last summer Cathy

Cono, Elizabeth Kingsley and others began a play date program that had some limited successes. But I believe we need to do more. Therefore, I am challenging us to the following and I invite any led by the Spirit to speak with me, Cathy Cono or our Lay Leaders, Leigh Bak and Kelly O'Hara, to get involved:

First, from now on, every baptismal family will, in addition to the godparents they choose, have a church sponsor who is not a family member. We do this now for both adult new members and Confirmation students, so why not baptismal families? In consultation with those I just mentioned I will assume this task.

Second, we need someone(s) with computer gifts to manage a database of baptismal families, often called a Cradle Roll.

Third, following Cathy's lead, we would use this database to inquire of these families how the church might be helpful to them. I can imagine, for example, a resource list of babysitters or a Parent's Day Out program or learning opportunities on a variety of subjects of interest to young families. We would also invite them, through various communications, to keep their baptismal vow by being regularly present in worship and other activities.

Fourth, since we promise in the baptismal ritual to pray for these families, I ask that you and I include it from time to time in our prayers spoken aloud.

The Christian faith is more "caught" than "taught." May these steps in our growing and increasingly complex congregation help us to infect our newest families with the love of God. By doing so we come to know anew that "*Baptismus sum*"—I am baptized--means claiming the love that God showers on us all, God's beloved, rejoicing in the sweet love Jesus has for us and we have for him. Amen.