A Historical and Ecumenical Look at Baptism

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on January 13, 2019, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-17 and Mark 1:4-11
Copyright © 2019 by Brenda Loreman

The first Sunday after Epiphany has traditionally been reserved for celebrating the Baptism of Jesus. Since baptism has traditionally been viewed as a ritual that, at least in part, is the way a person becomes a member of the Christian faith, it seems an appropriate day to begin a sermon series on church membership.

For the next few Sundays, Pastor Jeff and I will be offering sermons that we hope will help us, both as individuals and as a church community, answer this meta-question: "What should be the requirements for membership at Niles Discovery Church, and what should be the expectations of members?"

To begin this exploration, we're beginning at the very beginning, with a look at the requirement for membership in the church in the earliest days of its formation: the ritual of baptism.

That one of the primary rituals of our faith tradition involves water is not a surprise. As an element vital to the creation and sustaining of all life on earth, water was often seen by ancient peoples as divine, or having divine properties, and most ancient cultures explained the creation of life on earth as beginning in the water. And so water was vital in many early religious rituals.

Jesus's first-century Jewish community was steeped in stories about water. In Genesis, among God's first acts of creation were to separate the heavens from the sea and raise land from the waters. In another story from Genesis, the powerful flood waters wash away the sins of humanity and through Noah, humanity has a chance to renew itself. In Exodus, the Israelites escape slavery by passing through the waters of the Red Sea, and, as we saw in the story from 2 Kings, the general Naaman, with the help of the prophet Elisha, is freed from a debilitating skin disease through the cleansing waters of the Jordan river.

These stories of the Hebrew Bible show the importance of water ritual to this ancient culture. And before there was Christian baptism, there was Jewish *tevilah*, or total immersion in water as act of purification. In Jewish communities throughout the world, the *mikvah*, or ritual bathhouse, was considered an essential structure—and still is in Orthodox communities. "*Mikva'ot* have been unearthed all over the world. Wherever Jews have lived, they have built *mikva'ot*, even during periods of persecution. *Mikva'ot* were even hidden under floorboards of homes during the German Third Reich."[1] The *tevilah* was required in many different ritual circumstances—before marriage, or after returning from war, for example—and as part of the ritual for conversion to the Jewish faith.

[1] Rosita Arvigo and Nadine Epstein, *Spiritual Bathing: Healing Rituals and Traditions from Around the World* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 2003), 20.

So it really is no surprise that the prophet John the Baptist stood in the river Jordan—a sacred river to the Jewish community—and ritually immersed or poured water over those who wished to repent and receive new life. And it's no surprise that this ritual became a core practice of those who followed Jesus. Of the two primary sacred rituals mentioned in the new testament—baptism and communion—baptism is the only one that appears in all four gospels, and is mentioned more times throughout the other New Testament texts than the ritual of the Eucharist. It's apparent that it was very early on the way both Gentiles and Jews were initiated into the path as followers of Jesus.

In these early days, baptism was a ritual practiced primarily by adult converts to the new faith. Since few children were born into Christian households at first, everyone had to be converted. And so the earliest practice was what we would now call believer's baptism: the baptism of someone who was old enough to make his or her own decision to become a Christian and participate in the ritual.

It was also not a ritual that was done on the spur of the moment. From early church documents and histories, it is apparent that baptism was taken very seriously, and those preparing for baptism—called catechumens—spent weeks, or even years, in study, prayer, and fasting, until they were ready to be baptized. The Apostles' Creed, familiar perhaps to many of you if you had a traditional Christian upbringing, very likely began as an early oral teaching for catechumens. It would be practiced in question and answer form until the convert could recite it by heart.[2]

Up until the fourth century, when Christianity was no longer a persecuted religion, it is likely that each Christian community had its own version of preparation and study, as well as baptism ritual and liturgy. Some baptized in the name of Jesus Chist. Some used the trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some immersed the catechumen, while others poured water over the head.[3]

And it's likely that different communities had different theologies around the meaning of the ritual. The New Testament itself offers differing understandings of what baptism means. Generally speaking, there are five understandings of the ritual that are scattered throughout the New Testament, and these five have been emphasized by different communities in different times and for different reasons:

- **The cleansing, washing, or forgiveness of sin.** Peter says in Acts, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven." (2:38)
- **A union with Christ in his death and resurrection.** Paul says in Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (6:3-4)

[2] Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 175.

[3] Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 2-3.

- **Incorporation into the church.** Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "We were all baptized into one body." (12:13)
- **Reception of the Holy Spirit.** Mark's gospel relates that Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." (1:10)
- **New birth or regeneration.** The Pauline letter to Titus claims, "He saved us […] through the water of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit." (3:5)[4]

Once Christianity came out of the shadows and was sanctioned by the Roman Empire, the church began to develop a common theology and practice of baptism. The 40-day period of fasting during Lent became the preferred time for preparation for baptism. The liturgy settled on a trinitarian formula, and a profession of faith by the baptismal candidate.[5]

Scholars are unsure when exactly the shift to infant baptism began. There are some very early references to baptizing infants in the third century (and some early controversy about it), but it probably wasn't a regular practice until a major shift in the meaning of baptism occurred in the fifth century, with the theology developed by Augustine of Hippo. Augustine's literal reading of the creation story in Genesis led him to develop the theory of original sin—that because of the sin of Adam, we are all born stained with sin and needed the sacrament of baptism to be washed clean and avoid the punishment of eternal damnation. It wasn't so much that Augustine's original sin theology started the trend of infant baptism, but it gave the practice theological justification that made it more popular until infant baptism became the norm in the church.[6]

The practice of infant baptism didn't shift for another thousand years, until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. As they began to strip away the non-biblical practices of the Roman Catholic Church, many Protestant reformers began to look to the early church for its practices of the sacraments, and began to reclaim believers baptism as the "proper" way to do baptism. In 1608 the English priest John Smythe started what become the (capital-B) Baptist movement, and by the mid-18th century, it had spread to North America and other parts of the world. The popularity of believers' baptism was likely enhanced by the Enlightenment, with its disdain of all things supernatural. It seemed rational for faith to come before baptism, rather than the other way around.[7]

Faith was a particularly important concept to our Protestant reformer ancestors. The Reformation, countering the corruption of the church practices of the time that allowed people to buy their way out of purgatory, instead emphasized that only God's grace can save us, and that grace is accessed through our faith alone, not through purchasing a "get out of jail free" card.

The concept of faith is also central to Christianity as a whole. In the New Testament, every single book except for two of the short letters of John uses the words "faith" or "believe." Jesus

[4] James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 53-70.
[5] Bradshaw, 22-30.
[6] Bradshaw, 31.
[7] White, 38-39.

speaks of faith often, and the apostle Paul says that we are "justified," or made right with God, through our faith.[8]

Since faith is "utterly central to the Christian life."[9] it seems important to unpack it here; but, like a lot of other words associated with Christianity, it has been distorted by misuse. So what does it mean for us as progressive Christians?

In his books, *The Heart of Christianity* and *Speaking Christian*, the progressive theologian Marcus Borg suggests that the modern understanding of the word "faith" is not as multi-dimensional as the ancient understanding of the word would be. Today, we tend to equate the word "faith" with the word "belief." Borg describes it this way:

> I find this understanding among my students. I ask them, "What do you understand the word 'believing' to mean? When do you use the word 'believe'"? Their most frequent response: "When you're not sure or when you don't know." There are some things you know, and other things you're not sure about, and so you can only believe. Believing and knowing are contrasted. Faith is what you turn to when knowledge runs out. Even more strongly, faith is what you need when beliefs and knowledge conflict.[10]

Borg calls this meaning of faith *assensus*, or "faith as belief—that is, giving one's mental assent to a proposition, as believing a claim or statement as true."[11] For many people, this is the only meaning of the word "faith." And for many, Christian faith then means <u>having</u> to believe that questionable things are true. Some people struggle with Christianity because they can't give mental assent to the miracles of Jesus, or the Virgin birth, or the idea that Genesis reflects the actual origins of the earth and its creatures.

Faith as *assensus* is an understanding that makes the Christian life only about the beliefs in one's head, rather than putting an emphasis on what's in the heart. Borg asserts that:

> In the Bible and the Christian tradition, the heart is a metaphor for a deep level of the self, a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing, our intellect, emotions, and volition. The heart is thus deeper than our "head," deeper than our conscious self and the ideas we have in our heads. Faith concerns this deeper level of the self. Faith is the way of the heart, not the way of the head.[12]

And Borg suggests that there are other historical understandings of faith, which reflect this heart-centered meaning. The first of these is faith as *fiducia*. The closest English word that communicates this idea is "trust." Faith is a radical trust in God—not trusting that certain statements about God are true, but actually trusting in God. Faith as trust in like learning to float—learning to relax and let the deep water carry you. When we practice faith as *fiducia*, we

---

[8] Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 27.

[9] Borg, 28.

[10] Ibid., 29.

[11] Ibid., 28.

[12] Ibid., 26.

trust in the buoyancy of God, and we learn to understand God as our support, our foundation, and our safe place.

The second heart-centered understanding of faith is faith as *fidelitas*. It sounds like the English word "fidelity," and that's what it means. In other words, faith is being faithful in our relationship with God. Just as we practice faithfulness in our committed human relationships, faith in God also means giving God our "loyalty, allegiance, [and our] commitment of the self at its deepest level, the commitment of the 'heart.'"[13]

As Christians, we build and deepen our relationship with God through the ways we practice our faith: through attending worship, engaging in a prayer life, and performing acts of justice and compassion.[14]

Unlike the current modern understanding of faith, Marcus Borg urges us to notice that these historical understandings of faith are relational:

> Faith as *fidelitas* is faithfulness to our relationship to God, and faith as *fiducia* is deepening trust in God, flowing out of a deepening relationship with God. […] Faith in these senses enables us to live our lives and to face our deaths in a new way. In this life, a radical centering in God leads to a deepening trust that transforms the way we see and live our lives. Living, trusting, and centering are all related in complex ways. They are all matters of the heart, and not primarily of the head. And in our deaths, dying means trusting in the buoyancy of God, that the one who has carried us in this life is the one into whom we die.[15]

When we express our faith at baptism, or reaffirm our baptism, I don't think that means we have to believe in a certain thing in order to receive God's grace. We don't have to give mental assent to a particular proposition. What I think we are affirming is our relationships—with God, with the world, and with our fellow travelers on the road. Another progressive theologian, John Shelby Spong, says, "Christianity has never been about believing correctly. It was never meant to provide the basis by which believers would separate heresy from truth. It was always a call to practice the task of living, loving, and being."[16] For me, that's what baptism is—answering the call into deeper love with God, self, and neighbor.

Having just opined for over 2500 words on baptism and its significance in Christian history, I'm going to dare to say that just because this is the way things have been doesn't mean it's the way things will be. The Christian writer Phyllis Tickle (documentary yesterday), in her book *The Great Emergence*, posits that about every 500 years or so, the church has a big rummage sale and sells off the old dusty things in the attic that aren't working anymore.

---

[13] Borg, 32.
[14] Ibid., 33.
[15] Ibid., 36-37.
[16] John Shelby Spong, *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds Not the Reformation Can Priduce a Living Faith Today*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 276.

It's interesting to note that the big shifts in baptism theology happened right around two of these rummage sale eras—the fall of Rome in the late fifth century, and the Reformation in the 16th. If Tickle's theory is accurate, then we're due for another rummage sale about now—or we are already part of one, and we just can't see what's for sale cause we're still holding on to the stuff.

Something new may be emerging—some radical understanding or change that will totally reform the Church of Jesus Christ. It may be as radical as John standing in the Jordan baptizing Jesus, or as radical as Luther nailing his theses on the church door. What will emerge in the years to come? I look forward to finding out. Amen.