

2024 10 06 Baptism meditation
World Communion Sunday, TUMC.
Lamentations 3:22-23

The steadfast love of the Creator never ceases,
 God's mercies never come to an end;
 they are new every morning;
 great is your faithfulness.

Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus invites us into membership using the symbols of baptism and communion. In recent weeks we've welcomed others into membership, and as pastors, Michele and I have talked about what it means to be an Anabaptist. If you're curious about why membership matters, listen to those recordings. Each person speaks to their own journey, and membership implies the opportunity to learn from one another. Today's service includes both communion and baptism, and baptism will be my focus for this morning.

Baptism is about beginnings. Some church buildings have a baptismal font at the entrance, to remind people as they enter the building that their discipleship journey began with water. Baptism echoes the journey of God's people from death into life,

from slavery into freedom, passing through the Sea of Reeds¹ and the Jordan river on dry ground.² In the law of Moses, ritual washing in living water is part of the rites of purification and preparation for worshipping God. The prophet Elisha instructed the proud and powerful Naaman to wash himself in the Jordan to be healed of his skin disease. Because he was eventually willing to be humble, he was healed and came to recognise that his warrior ways were weaker than God's welcome.³

Before he ever preached a sermon or invited anyone to follow him, Jesus sought out John the Baptist at the Jordan⁴, and asked to be baptised, and in turn he commissioned his disciples to baptise others, welcoming people of all nations and languages into the community of God's faithful people around the world.⁵

Baptism takes a lot of preparation. Early catechumens met daily for three years to prepare for the Easter baptism! Today, some seek out special bodies of water or wait for a day of auspicious meaning, calling friends and family together as witnesses. And, baptism can happen at any time, whenever the moment is right, at whatever temperature or depth of water, responding to the need. Philip encountered a eunuch who served the Queen of Ethiopia, who was wondering what kind of hope the God of the Bible could offer someone whose body and skin and sexuality and gender and nationality and loyalty did not meet the standard. But when they saw water, the eunuch asked 'what prevents me from being baptised?' and they went down into the water and found new life.⁶

Baptism is a universal Christian symbol, recognized across the world and across time as the entry into the universal church. It does not belong to any one denomination and while our church practises a specific model of baptism we recognise other baptisms as valid according to the conviction of the individual.

¹ Exodus 13:17-14:31.

² Joshua 3:9-17.

³ 2 Kings 5:1-19.

⁴ Mark 1:9-10.

⁵ Matthew 28:19.

⁶ Acts 8:26-39.

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Baptism is universal, and it is also personal. Baptism comes from personal choice and conviction, responding to Jesus' invitation into new life. We understand that baptism is a public expression of a choice that the person has made, a commitment to faithfully follow Jesus. We ask that the person seeking baptism consider what it means, and share their faith conviction publicly. Although Anabaptists emphasise a mature understanding, this is ultimately not about intellectual understanding. Biblical belief is about trust. It is about loyalty to God, in a world where your loyalty is assumed to belong to the richest, the strongest, the loudest. Belief in God is about listening to the small and silent voices, about seeing weakness and feeling sorrow, and choosing to follow. Into death, into new life.

We expect those who seek baptism to understand the choice they make, but you should know that there is no amount of knowledge of God that will make you worthy of baptism. No degree of theological insight qualifies you to be a part of God's people. This is a pure gift of grace, and while God rejoices in the understanding we attain, it is God who makes the way.

But there are expectations. You are expected to be sorry for the sins you have been a part of⁷ - the ways in which you have turned away from trusting God, betrayed and hurt your neighbour, denied the sanctity of life, and prioritised what you want over what others need. This call to turn away from your sins is not one that we often name in this house. But it is what we try to live out, encouraging one another towards acts of love, hope, hospitality, and generosity, learning to return gentleness when we encounter hostility, to speak the truth when lies are enthroned, and to acknowledge our failures, and our need for grace.⁸

I do not think that our baptism candidates are especially egregious sinners. I do think that we all need to know it's okay to be sorry for the things you have done

⁷ From the testimony of Felix Manz: "only those should be baptized who have repented, who have taken to themselves a new life, having died to their vices."

⁸ Menno Simons writes that "they become of a new mind, deny themselves, bitterly lament their old, corrupted life, and look diligently to the word of the Lord, who has shown them such great love; to fulfill all that which [Jesus] has taught and commanded them in his holy gospel".

wrong, and the good things you have not done. We all need to hear that we can do better, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit living in each one of us. At least, I know I need that reminder.

You hear this in the scriptures chosen by our new members. The first is from Lamentations, a book of bitter failure that reveals seeds of hope, claiming:

The steadfast love of the Creator never ceases,

God's mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning;

great is your faithfulness.⁹

Listen out later for the second scripture. It will show the heart that seeks rebirth and regeneration.¹⁰

Baptism is universal and personal. It is chosen and it is given. It faces death and welcomes new life. It is something you do once, and once only, a permanent choice and conviction. And it is something that we will do with you as often as you need to, as a symbol of healing and a sign of forgiveness.

Baptism as a Christian ordinance comes from the ministry of John, a child of privilege and education who walked away from civilisation, returning to the wellspring of his tradition in reform and renewal. As Anabaptists, we are part of another reform movement that chose the symbol of baptism to draw us back to our wellspring. Those offered each other rebaptism nearly 500 years ago knew that they were risking their lives by provoking the cosy alliance of religion and state. Many suffered the consequences, just as John did, just as Jesus did. We do not forget them, or our siblings in faith around the world who endure persecution.

In solidarity with our ecumenical siblings we use the trinitarian formula from the Gospel of Matthew, baptising in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

⁹ Lamentations 3:21-22.

¹⁰ Luke 18:9-14.

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as Christians have always done. And we add some of the other ways we know God: as Mother, as Love-in-the-Flesh, as Breath of Life. We only know in part, but God embraces us completely.

Baptism does not mean you have all your questions answered. It means that you have chosen to seek your answers in the company of Jesus. It means that you trust that the love of God is stronger than death, and stronger than anything wrong you have ever done.

Membership in an Anabaptist church does not mean you agree with all of the Anabaptist conclusions. It means that you're open to arguing with Anabaptists, and praying with us, and fighting nonviolently side-by-side.

I don't know how this will change things for you, spiritually, in the days to come. You may find new resonance in the stories we share, new hope in your heart, new words in your mind, new spiritual insights and struggles. I do not know. But because of what we do here today, you will be able to tell us. Thanks be to God.