

“WHAT ARE WE BAPTISED INTO?”

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Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 10:34-43

In Acts, we read, “Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.’”

As I’ve approached today’s service, thinking about it over several weeks, I thought I knew what I wanted to say about Baptism.

I would define a sacrament — the old standard definition, “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”

I would explore with you what our Presbyterian “Directory for Worship” says Baptism is and what it signifies — the information I regularly go over with parents, prior to baptising their infant — using such words as “rebirth,” “sign and seal,” “gift of grace,” “washing away of sin,” “resurrection,” “adoption,” “covenant,” and “putting on the fresh garment of Christ.”

I would have probably quoted Calvin, whose words support the Presbyterian position *and my conviction* that Baptism is a recognition of what God has already done, in claiming the baptised child or adult – “even before they are able to respond in faith.” Calvin wrote, “because by the blessing of the promise they already belonged to the body of Christ, they are received into the church with this solemn sign.”¹ Baptism is, then, for Presbyterians, not a required act to avoid hell and damnation, but a visible sign of the reception into the Church family of an already-claimed child of a loving God.

I had planned on relating our baptismal vows to the hard work ahead of this congregation in the coming year, as we seek spiritual and numerical growth, along with financial stability and enhanced ministry.

I could have elaborated on all these things, and certainly observed the symbolism of dying to sin – in the simulated drowning of the sinner – and rising to new life. And the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan would, of course, be the cornerstone of the sermon.

But then a troubled young man with curly hair, Jared Lee Loughner, allegedly pulled a 9 mm Glock and shot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, staff member Gabe Zimmerman, Chief Judge John Roll, Rev. Dorwin Stoddard, 9-year old Christina Taylor Greene (b. 9/11/01) and several others in Tucson AZ.

And after that, my approach to this sermon took on a different tone. Diana Butler Bass, noted theologian, and author of *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, wrote a persuasive blog. She reflected on her parents’ disappointment when they attended church after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. She writes, “The minister rose to preach. The congregation held its breath. But he . . . preached as if nothing had happened.” Bass urged those of us in pulpits this morning to “help . . . make sense of the shooting.”²

But I’m afraid that can’t be done. As one of my colleagues observed – why do we refer to “senseless violence,” when all violence is senseless? There is little to make sense of when a young person is so filled with twisted thinking and rage that he feels the only acceptable action is to shoot wildly, taking out both the object of his rage and as many others nearby as possible.

Bass nevertheless charges preachers, that “we need some sustained spiritual reflection on how badly we have behaved in recent years as Americans--how much we've allowed fear to motivate our politics, how cruel we've allowed our discourse to become, how little we've listened, how much we've dehumanized public servants, how much we hate.”

She concludes, “We need redemption gushing from the rivers of God's love, not that of blood-soaked sidewalks.”

And so we circle back to Baptism. We are forced to remember that each one of us is human, each one of us has “fallen short of the glory of God,” that each one of us longs for the purification and redemption we are promised through Christ, that each one of us stands in the need of forgiveness, and that each one of us needs redemption “gushing from the rivers of God's love.”

And so today, we honor our baptism – past or future. We gather in gratitude for redemption through the Living Waters. And we mourn the blood shed — both the blood of an innocent 9-year old yesterday, and the blood of an innocent 33-year old 2000 years ago. We remember that from the days of Noah, humanity has been steeped in violence, and that this violence is abhorrent to God.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,” said Peter. “You know the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ.”

And so, we are reminded, “... that those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus must not bear arms and rant words of hate, but we must be willing to risk our own lives for peace, justice, dignity, and peace for all.”³ We are reminded that casting blame on the rhetoric of hate, which I admit is my first inclination, will do nothing to stem the violence. We are reminded by the immediate past-moderator of our denomination that “during times of violence and grief, there is a fine line between voicing righteous indignation and fanning the flames of hatred. Lord hear our prayer.”⁴ And we recall the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., that “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

And so, “On this day, let our response to violence be sorrow. Let our response to desperation be faithfulness. Let our response to anger be reason. Let our response to hatred be love. Let our response to despair be hope. Let us practice justice, let us confess that we are sinners in need of mercy.”⁵ And let us most of all, on this feast day, “remember our baptism and be thankful. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

ENDNOTES

1. Institutes IV.XV.22

2. <http://blog.beliefnet.com/christianityfortherestofus/2011/01/congresswoman-gabrielle-giffords -speaking-for-the-soul.html>

3. Robyn M's response to Bass' blog.

4. Bruce Reyes-Chow, on Facebook, 1/8/11.

5. Poem by George R. Pasley, in response to the Tucson shootings, Facebook, 1/8/11.