

BAPTISM: A SIGN OF LOVE

Acts 10:34-48 & John 13:33-35
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After seminary, to be ordained, you have to go through a credentialing process of interviews, exams, papers, and more interviews. The first paper I had to write for my Ordination process was on my theology of baptism. It was a carefully crafted essay, linear with a basic thesis and three supporting points, and sailed me through my first interview easily. Which is kind of funny, since baptism in scripture is really a mess. There's nothing linear about it. There's no consistent practice, and no set rules.

As far as we know, Jesus never baptized anyone. That would have been his cousin John the Baptist, who was roaming around the 1st century Palestinian countryside with his wild crazy hair that he never cut, a messy beard that he never shaved probably filled with remnants of the locusts and honey upon which he dined. And when John baptized you, there was nothing neat and clean about it. You'd come down a muddy river bank, walk into the water, and – Whoosh! – John would dunk you all the way down, proclaiming in a loud voice “Repent!” As if the process weren't dramatic enough, when John baptizes Jesus, the heavens open up and a loud voice cries out with love and blessing for Jesus. If you've ever seen the movie, “O Brother, Where Art Thou,” you can catch a glimpse of what it might have been like; but even that scene is gentle compared to what the real thing was probably like. Still, as people feel pulled to that riverside, you catch a sense of how people felt drawn to both John and Jesus, as they called people to turn their lives around and follow a new path. In the film, Delmar can't help himself: He runs into that water fully clothed, splashing his way toward the pastor, jumping the line, and joyously accepting the preacher's promise that his “sins have been washed away!” He's so overjoyed that

his brother soon follows him into the water

For Delmar and many others, baptism is that turning around moment in life. It's a chance to begin again, to turn around from past mistakes and regrets and turn toward a path of walking with God. But it's not the water that gets people there – for the water is just a sign, the sign that God's love has enough healing power to help us start again, and God's grace is strong enough to free us from past regrets and sins and sorrows. Baptism: A sign of love.

The next “big” baptism in scripture is very different that the baptism John the Baptist offered, but even John knew that his baptism was just a foreshadowing of greater things to come. The next baptism in scripture comes not with water, but with fire on Pentecost. What a chaotic mess that must have been: People speaking in languages they didn't even know, somehow understanding one another through the Spirit's power, and Peter seeing that this is a vision of God's promises fulfilled as the followers of Christ are empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin building Christ's church. We'll hear that scripture on June 9 when we celebrate Graduation Sunday with our young adults, and someone will probably read it carefully and calmly. But Pentecost baptism was anything but careful and calm. For this baptism was birthing a brand new thing, creating a whole new community that we now call “the Church.” Yet again, baptism initiated something new. When we receive the Spirit, whether we symbolize it with water or not, we are baptized with the Spirit. It doesn't really matter whether we use water in that moment or not, because it's not the water that gets people there – for the water is just a sign, the sign that God's love is strong enough to create something new, form a new community, create a new life out of our old lives, or even create new life from what we thought was actually dead. God's love can do that, and baptism in the Holy Spirit empowers us to receive that love as a creative, transformative gift to spur us on to the new lives to which we are called. Still, it's baptism: a sign

“Baptism: A Sign of Love for All” ~ John 13:33-35 & Acts 10:34-48 © 2019 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com

of love.

And so, in the Book of Acts, the young church begins figuring out what baptism might mean for them. They baptize with water, but proclaim that the true baptism is baptism with the Holy Spirit. They invite Jewish followers to be baptized, and begin their new journey with the Spirit's power. And so the church is strengthened and grows, because of the Spirit's powerful love. Baptism: a sign of love.

But the Spirit isn't linear, isn't a rule-follower, who can be contained in some box or carefully crafted ordination paper. She blows where she would have us go, inspires us outside of those boxes and perfect thesis papers. Right before the eyes of Peter and those first followers, the Holy Spirit falls upon every person gathered together, even the Gentiles – the non Jews. So before they know it, the young church leaders are realizing that the Spirit isn't just for the Jewish followers of Jesus, but for any and all who would follow Jesus. And so, baptism becomes a communal act, a time of worship and celebration for all who would receive the Spirit. Everyone who comes to the waters and fire of baptism is welcome, equally welcome, and equally blessed by the Spirit of God who loves and embraces every one of us, binding us together as one community, one Body of Christ. But it's not the water that gets us there – for the water is just a sign, the sign that God's love has enough reconciling power to welcome people from all walks of life, and God's grace is strong enough to bring us together in unity and love, despite our differences. Baptism: A sign of love.

And so, we come to the waters of baptism, not because the waters are what get us closer to God and one another, but because the waters of baptism are a reminder that God's love is what gets us there. In The Gospel of John – not written by John the Baptist, but by other disciples of Jesus – in this Gospel, Jesus promises that a Helper will come to the disciples, an Advocate who *“Baptism: A Sign of Love for All” ~ John 13:33-35 & Acts 10:34-48 © 2019 Mary Scifres ~ www.maryscifres.com*

will empower them to live his teachings. This Holy Spirit of Pentecost is that Helper promised to us, the Spirit-Helper who helps us to live out Jesus' command that we should "love one another as Christ has loved us." This Spirit-Helper is the part of God who lives in us, who works through us, who strengthens and empowers us to be signs of love for one another and for all the world. And in baptism, we invite the Spirit to wash over us, to flow through us, to nourish and enliven us, so that our loves will flow as freely to others as God's love flows to us. This is why baptism is such a beautiful celebration, and such a precious moment in our lives of faith. For in this moment, the waters reminds us that God's grace is flowing over us, covering us with hope to shield us from despair. In this moment, the water reminds us that God's love is flowing through us, cleansing away the muddy parts of our lives that limit the flow of love. In this moment, the water reminds us that Christ the Living Water is nourishing us with healing and wholeness, so that our broken parts are mended and our loneliness is assuaged. In this moment, the water reminds us that the Spirit's power is flowing through us, strengthening us to grow in faith and service and love to transform this world with God's love and grace, flowing through us to every one we meet.

But it's not the water that gets us there – for the water is just a sign. But the sign sure helps. If I were to write that ordination paper today, it would be short and sweet. Baptism is a reminder that God's love and grace are available to anyone and everyone, an invitation to receive gift of Christ the Living Water healing our lives and making us whole, and an opening for the Spirit to flow in and through us, so that we can live out our love for God, our love ourselves, and our love for others, just as Christ. Baptism: A sign of love for all