

THE WELCOME OF BAPTISM¹

Today is the Baptism of Our Lord—the celebration of Jesus' baptism. And today we have baptized Mackinley Laverne Parrott. So, let's talk a bit about baptism. I have three little stories.

The first is the story of my own baptism, which most of you have heard and some of you may be tired of hearing. It is nevertheless meaningful for me. My parents did not present me for baptism when I was little. They did send me to Sunday school. When the 9th grade rolled around and my peers were "joining the church," I balked. Deep down I wanted to be in the church. But I didn't want to be in so badly that I was willing to be baptized to get in. Not that Baptism was so bad; I mean how bad could some water on your head be? What was bad in my 13 year old mind was acknowledging that I hadn't been baptized, which is to say I had been raised in a heathen home. Surely, I reasoned such non-church kids were a tragic rarity among these fine Southern California Presbyterians.

Obviously, there was way too much potential humiliation in joining the church. So, I simply dropped out.

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on January 11, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA

Now, I have been baptized. That event took place about 4 years later when I was seventeen. What baptism means to me now is the opposite of what not being baptized meant when I was 13. It is a constant reminder that I am a member of Christ's church. I do belong. The Lord's Table is set for me. Baptism means welcome.

A second story. We read in the gospels that Jesus was baptized. Now that is mildly shocking. It's shocking because baptism at that time—in John the Baptist's ministry was connected with repentance. What John preached was if you really want to own up to the mess your life is in, if you really want to say you've got to turn your life around, then "walk the walk" and signify your sincerity and contrition by letting the Baptizer dunk you—give you a spiritual bath—in the Jordan River.

Wouldn't it seem that Jesus would be the last person on the planet who would need to go through that process? Nevertheless, Jesus in fact shows up on the bank of the river and insists on receiving baptism. A couple of the gospels hint that the Baptist was the most unsettled of anyone at Jesus wanting to be baptized. Could this really be the coming one, when he takes his place in line as a repentant sinner?

Finding Jesus waiting to be baptized would be like running into your boss at an alcoholic's anonymous meeting; or your minister going forward at a Billy Graham crusade, or your stock broker at the unemployment office; or the mayor in your psychiatrist's waiting room. There is something both jarring and comforting about Jesus' baptism. It's like he's saying, "I'm really one of you." It's like you're thinking, "I'm a mess and I'm in the best of company."

A third story. Baptism was not invented by Christians or Jesus or even John the Baptist. Baptism was taken over by Christianity and God invested it with new meaning. But before John the Baptist and Jesus came along, baptism existed in Judaism as a purifying bath. When pagans converted to Judaism, the men were circumcised. And because they were pagans, both men and women, they had to be dipped in a special purifying bath. They were baptized in a way.

Here's the message in all this. If you're born to Jewish parents with baby boys being circumcised. You're in the chosen people. If you are born to Gentile parents, you can convert to Judaism. Men must accept circumcision. And then, because you're pagan-yuck-you need the extra measure of the bath or baptism.

The early church under God's guidance rearranged all of that and baptism came to mean incorporation into Jesus and sharing his life. And everyone had to be baptized. For Pagans, that was great. No circumcision. But for Jews—suddenly they've got to be dipped. Can you imagine being an observant Jew from twenty generations of observant Jews, suddenly needing the Gentile bath? They must have thought, "We've believed in the same God for 20 generations, we've practiced the Law, the Torah, scrupulously for generations. Now, we believe that our messiah has come. And the church wants to dunk us like we're a bunch of non-kosher, idol worshippers. Can't we just come in by letter of transfer?"

So, in the earliest years baptism was a great equalizer. All Christians, regardless of background, were new babies in Christ. Suddenly, folks who never would have been together; folks who never would have known each other, much less call one another brother and sister in Christ were brought together. And the door into that unity was baptism.

Can you see where this is going? Baptism brings together. Together with Christ. Together with one another.

Don't you think it interesting that Mackinley's baptism will be acknowledged by most other Christian churches? If she

becomes a Methodist or Catholic someday, they will recognize her as a Christian because of this baptism. So this isn't Presbyterian baptism. It certainly isn't First Presbyterian Church baptism. There is a huge welcome here. This is Christian baptism and this is McKinley's welcome into the Christian Church.

And that goes to a larger point. Welcome. The welcome of baptism is part of the great welcome of God. There is a scandalous level of welcome in the whole Christian life. In a world where race and class and family and money and political opinion and nationality, and even religion divides and re-divides us into groups of similar minded people, Christ brings together. Hasn't it been your Christian experience that has brought you into closeness with people who you'd never even know if you weren't a Christian? Hasn't your Christian walk sent you across boundaries you'd never cross on your own? How does the Bible put it, "In Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself." And we see it in baptism. We've been welcomed in a deep and scandalous way. Now we welcome others.