

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What do you think the relevance of Baptism is for most people?

Do you know anyone who has been baptized, but isn't a part of a Christian community now? I do. Some of them are really nice and fine people. Others may not be great examples of virtue, but they are not necessarily wicked or evil.

Do you know anyone who has not been baptized? I do. Some of them are really nice and fine people. Others may not be great examples of virtue, but are not necessarily wicked or evil. You see, baptism doesn't confer virtue on a person.

So what does it do? Why do we baptize people to become Christians?

This Sunday is when we remember the Baptism of Jesus. It is the foundation of our own Baptism. Christians baptize because Jesus was baptized and his disciples baptized people right from the beginning.

In Matthew's Gospel we learn that John was baptizing people for the repentance but he also promised that a man would come who was mightier than he was, a man who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And then we learn in today's Gospel that Jesus' baptism opened the heavens and released the Spirit of God to come onto Jesus, and ultimately into us.

Saint Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth "Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him." *1 Corinthians 6.17*:

So too, in our Baptism we are united to the Lord Jesus Christ. But what does that mean?

Baptism is one of the two scriptural sacraments. Along with the Holy Eucharist, we believe that baptism is essential to our life as Christians.

In our baptism we are signed with the cross with these words, "you are marked as Christ's own forever." This means at least two things: first, our lives no longer belong to us, and second, we are grafted into the Body of Christ, where we experience the forgiveness of sin and "real table fellowship", the kind of table fellowship, where we eat together as sinners reconciled in Christ.

So first, as baptized Christians, our lives no longer belong to us. This means we are on notice to work for Jesus – not for ourselves, and not for our own ends. We commit ourselves to this work, when we pledge the Baptismal Covenant, which we will be saying together this morning. This means that we are signing on to the Purposes of the Kingdom of God. Some of you may have read the Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren.

In order for our baptism to make sense or to have a living relevance, we need to claim that purpose – God’s purpose for our lives. Baptism doesn’t mean anything until we live into its meaning.

We also need to claim God's power to carry out God’s purposes for our lives, and we need to ask for God's peace, that we may endure life with hope and joy. In Christ, we can simply give the best we have to the highest we know because “Jesus loves us.”

Secondly, in our baptism we are grafted into the Body of Christ – which means we become part of the community of those whose sins are carried by Jesus. This is the great mystery of the atonement – the self-giving of Jesus which healed the breach between God and humans for all time. When we sin, we can come back to Jesus for forgiveness. When someone sins against us, we can forgive them by power of Jesus.

Being grafted into the Body of Christ also means that we are incorporated into the community of those who live in Jesus, that is, those people who simply “live life as it is lived”, but always in the knowledge of God’s love. It is the Body of Christ which makes this love tangible to us – by giving and receiving the loving actions we have for one another.

There was a Pharisee whose name was Nicodemus and who was a leader of the Jewish establishment. We know that he came to see Jesus one night and he said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’

Jesus then said something very interesting. He said, ‘Let me tell you something true – no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’

Nicodemus then asked him, ‘Are you saying anything that is relevant to me? How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can someone enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’

Jesus answered, ‘The real truth is that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is only flesh and it will go away, but what is born of the Spirit is spirit, and the spirit is indestructible and eternal. But don’t be surprised about what I just said to you, “You must be born from above.” That’s an inspiration from the Holy Spirit. You know how the wind is; it blows where it chooses. You can hear the sound of it, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. It is the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit, so I am telling you spiritual things and you need spiritual ears to hear.’ *John 3: 3*

Saint Paul wrote, “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” *2 Corinthians 3.17*

For Christians, this means that when we live in the Spirit of Christ, we do not have to be afraid of anything – not the challenges of living in Christian community, not taxes, not sickness, not even death, not changes in the church, not Bishops we may not agree with, not aging.

We do not have to be afraid of friends who hurt our feelings, or of neighbors who are Mexican American, and who might even come into our church to worship with us. As Christians we do not have to be afraid of hate mongers, or of those who seek violent solutions, like the young man in Arizona, who yesterday shot and killed and injured both public servants and other innocent bystanders.

Christians are those people who can stand together against the forces of evil and hatred, and against the forces of violence and injustice, because we have the Spirit of God, which is eternal and indestructible.

We do not need to be afraid, because Christians are the people who know Jesus Christ as the source of strength and the beacon of light, whether in the face of personal challenges and pain, or in the face of a chaotic society, like ours is today.

Christians are people who work together for the purposes for God's love for this world. Christians are the people who breathe the Spirit of Jesus, and then live in the freedom of the Spirit of Jesus, which blows where it will. Today that Spirit is blowing right on one of our young people – Alex Griffith, who has agreed to share a story that has a lot of meaning for him. So I would like us to listen to one of our brothers in Christ, one of those baptized into Christ in this church. Let's breathe in the Spirit of Jesus, which was given to all of us in our Baptism, as we listen to Alex.

[Alex presents some interesting material he got from Rob Bell – about the age of the disciples].

I would now like to conclude by sharing a portion of a poem by Elizabeth Alexander "Praise Song for the Day."

"Praise Song for the Day" *by Elizabeth Alexander*

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm*
or *take no more than you need*.

What if the mightiest word is love?
Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

Jesus is the mightiest word and when we are baptized into his life, we become the mightiest Word for this world.

May it be so. Amen.

The Reverend Canon Meredith Hunt
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