

Jesus' Baptism

Luke 3:15-21 by Patty Friesen (Jan.10/16)

Theologian William Willimon has said about baptism: “When you join the Rotary club, they give you a handshake and a lapel pin. When you join the church, we throw water on you.” Throwing water is the initiation rite of the Christian church but at least as Anabaptists, we wait until people are old enough to say yes to it.

We practice believers' baptism because of today's scripture when Jesus came from Galilee in the north to the Jordan River in the south and asked John the Baptist to baptize him. Baptism began as a Jewish cleansing ritual for worshippers coming to the Temple in Jerusalem much like Muslims today wash before going into the mosque. Religion has always had a washing with water component as a symbol of cleansing and forgiveness.

It is a radical thing John is doing by offering a one-time, good-for-forever baptism cleansing in a muddy river instead of the ritual cleansing at the Temple in Jerusalem. John belongs to the Essene community, a group of Jewish hippies who went out to the desert to read Torah and imagine the kingdom of God in new ways. They were hated by the religious authorities because they didn't follow the rules of ritual cleansing and worship in the Jerusalem Temple. Only those on the fringe of society would go to the Jordan River to be baptized.

It is significant that Jesus goes to these desert hippies to be baptized. It is significant that Jesus is baptized at all. Baptism was cleansing for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus was supposed to be without sin. Did he just want to see what the experience would be like? Did he do it to identify with sinners? His coming for baptism certainly

threw John the Baptist for a loop. John had just been ranting and raving about the wrath of God and telling them about the one who is coming who will baptize them with fire. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary but the chaff he will burn with an unquenchable fire.”

Then Jesus shows up in the baptism line-up with the liars, shoplifters, murderers and adulterers without his winnowing fork and unquenchable fire. Only Matthew’s gospel tells us that John initially refused to baptize him, hissing, “No – the script says I am supposed to be baptized by you.” Jesus hisses back, “Let it be so Now, for it is proper in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus doesn’t have time for catechism class – he wants to be baptized now to fulfill his role of identifying with all kind of people. The Messiah’s humility begins with baptism and will continue with eating with sinners and washing his disciples feet and then finally ending with crucifixion. The way of righteousness is the way of humility. John consented to baptize him but Jesus doesn’t meet John the Baptist’s expectations. John begrudgingly baptizes Jesus but long afterward sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. He has his doubts.

Jesus’ baptism is a bit of an embarrassment for the Gospel writers. Matthew is the only one who goes into any detail about it with this little tiff with John the Baptist. The other gospels barely mention it, only to mention the dove and God’s words, this is my Son with whom I am well pleased but not the fact that Jesus was climbing out of a muddy river at the time that happened. Scholars say that all this embarrassment is our surest proof that this actually happened because when someone tells you something that is not in their best interest for you to know, then you can be reasonably sure that they are telling the truth.

Baptism for Jesus apparently was a given. It was a part of a traditional ritual within a community. It was expected that one entered the Jewish community through circumcision and through regular cleansing of baptism at the Jewish temple. Jesus participates in these Jewish rituals because they are valued and important to the community of faith. At the same time, while Jesus values his Jewish tradition, he puts a new twist on it. He makes an individual choice about how he will participate in the tradition. He chooses to go outside the traditional cleansing in the temple for a once and for all cleansing by the Holy Spirit in a muddy river in the desert. And in so doing, the Spirit of God is made manifest to him personally and individually in the presence of the dove and the loving voice of God.

I wonder if Jesus had chosen ritual cleansing in the temple if the dove would have come to him there also. It may have been dangerous for the dove since doves were sacrificed in the temple. The dove is a symbol of sacrifice, a gentle bird that is offered itself for the forgiveness of sins. The song of this gentle bird is the voice of a proud parent, God offering Jesus to the world with, This is my Son with whom I am well pleased. This isn't the ax-wielding, fire-burning God that John the Baptist talked about. This is a loving parent who is proud, not of what Jesus has done – he isn't an honour roll student or a hockey star. As far as we can tell, Jesus hasn't actually done much of anything worth mentioning from age 12 to age 30. Finally at age 30 Jesus is making a career choice. Finally at age 30, Jesus decides to get baptized. But God is proud of Jesus anyhow. God is proud of Jesus just because he is Jesus and he is humble enough to get in the muddy river with the other sinners even if he isn't one himself. Jesus didn't come to

condemn them and didn't even baptize them himself. His power was about accepting people where they are at and empowering the disciples to do job of baptizing.

And so because Jesus chose baptism, baptism is our Christian ritual for commitment to God. Some churches leave baptism at that – a public confession of faith in Jesus but we Anabaptists traditionally link that confession of faith in Jesus with joining the worldwide Christian family tree and our particular or is that peculiar branch, the Mennonite branch of the family tree. It's the kind of family tree only God could love. There are Bible-thumping fundamentalists and left-wing tree-huggers. There are Green Partyers and Progressive Conservatives, gay people and straight people, pacifists and soldiers. There are people in this family you couldn't stand to be in the same room with for five minutes but like them or not, agree with them or not, this is the family you become part of when you are baptized. We call it the church. It's not even our church, or Menno Simon's church. It is Christ's church and only Christ can bear having a family like this.

In Jesus' baptism, God offers him to the world, This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Then Jesus also offers himself to the world, using the same words, "This is my Body broken for you with whom I am well pleased." In the painting by Massaccio, titled This is My Beloved Son, the body of Christ lies on the altar and God stands behind it like a priest offering it to us. This is the theological connection between baptism and communion. In baptism we publically claim new life in Christ and in communion we remind ourselves of that new life.

Baptism and communion are a choice – at least they are in the Mennonite Church. And while we adore our children, and they are a part of our church family for as long as

they choose, we do not automatically make them Christians, although that would be easier than trying to talk them into it later but that is their choice. Baptism is like another birth certificate – we are identified as Christian. Then we also carry a passport that is membership in the Mennonite Church without the ugly photograph.

We've had lots of conversations about baptism and membership at church these past six months. It's been a holy mess trying to talk the 8 year olds out of it and trying to talk the teenagers into it – and trying to figure out which category we have for new members who want to join Osler Mennonite while still identifying with their home congregations and trying to figure out what to do with new members who are still trying to figure out who Jesus is. It's been a holy, lovely, energizing mess. God be with us as we muddle through the messy meaning of baptism and church membership and our choices and public expressions. Ultimately, God loves us and we are just trying to love God the best ways we know how. Let us pray...