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The ABC's of Faith: Baptism

Acts 16:25-34 25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

I've never forgotten the young minister who once described looking out her kitchen window into her backyard on a hot summer's day to see her two elementary school-aged children "playing church." They did this from time to time, and usually they played "preacher" – with one of them standing behind a lawn chair that had become a

pulpit and one of them sitting and listening – or they played communion when it was snack time, solemnly passing juice boxes and goldfish crackers. But on this hot summer’s day, they were playing baptism. They were both standing beside a little hole they had dug in the garden and filled with water from the hose, repeatedly dunking a rather bedraggled-looking doll. But they didn’t do so silently; no, they did so loudly and with a “liturgy” that was what they assumed they’d heard when they had seen a baptism in church. So, by turns, brother and sister would stand over that little water-filled pit, dunking that doll while saying loudly *“In the name of the Father, and the Son, and **IN THE HOLE HE GOES!**”*

Today we continue with the second in our Epiphany sermon series on “The ABC’s of Faith,” and today’s sermon is indeed on “**B**” for “Baptism.” And it’s a fitting day to do so, for in the worldwide church, many congregations are observing what is called *“The Baptism of Jesus Sunday”* which is so beautifully depicted on our bulletin cover by Chinese-American artist He Qi. Now, in one short sermon, I can hardly begin to touch on everything that might be said on this topic, a ritual that goes back to our Jewish forebears. But even though not everything can be said, let me try to say a few things and let me actually use as our guide this story of the children and their doll-baby baptism, because that story charmingly illustrates three mistakes we can make in thinking about baptism but it also ends up finally illustrating something very powerful and very true about baptism.

The first mistake that is sometimes made about baptism is this: That baptism is something that can and should be done repeatedly, as often as someone might feel the need. The problem with that understanding baptism, though, is similar to the problem I

spoke of last week when I said that often you and I inadvertently act as if our relationship to God were up to us and that if we don't do the right things, say the right things, feel the right things, then we won't **earn** God's love. But that, as I noted, is just at odds with the God who loves us no matter what and whose love can neither be earned nor lost by what we do or don't do. God's love for us is *God's* act, not ours. It is the same with baptism. **Baptism is not something we do, it is something that God does.** That is why this congregation recognizes every form of baptism. If you were baptized as an infant by sprinkling, or if you were baptized as an adult by pouring, or if you were immersed at any age, this congregation delights in that and recognizes that indeed it was God acting in and through those baptisms. Now, in the earliest history of our wider church's movement, it was the case that more than a few congregations would not accept non-immersion baptisms and some wouldn't even accept any baptism unless it had been done in that congregation! But over the years, most Disciples of Christ congregations – like ours did – came to the view that insisting on such a view made the particular human forms and decisions more important than God. That's also why this preacher will not do "re-baptisms" – if you were baptized as an infant and want to **re-enact** your baptism as an adult, I will be delighted to do that. But in doing so we will recognize that you were indeed baptized by God and likely through the love of parents who brought you to that baptismal font. Because when all is said and done, baptism is God's act and what God has accomplished we can trust!

There's a second mistake that our opening story can illustrate that some have sometimes made about baptism. For what I didn't tell you is that that young minister then watched her children start arguing about whether one of them had "*dunked the*

baby enough.” You may laugh but it reminds me of a painful memory of a little church where I was the pastor in a tiny Indiana town many years ago. The church was undergoing some conflict and even in the midst of that conflict – miracle of miracles! – a young man decided he wanted to be baptized. But he was deathly afraid of water, and yet he wanted the powerful symbolic value of immersion. He asked me if it would be okay if he held one hand onto the railing while I immersed him. And that’s what we did. Unfortunately, after that baptism, a man in the church came up to him and to me and said *“I saw your hand sticking out. That means that you didn’t get totally immersed, so, you know, it doesn’t count and you’ll still go to hell.”* Not only was it a terribly cruel thing to say, it illustrates the second mistake we sometimes inadvertently make about baptism – which is to confuse it with magic or superstition. There are indeed all kinds of superstitions out there that say that you can’t step on sidewalk cracks or open an umbrella indoors or break a mirror. There are folks who have little superstitious rituals that they undertake when they travel or have a test at school or whatever. Such things can be charming or annoying, but all of them share the assumption that if you don’t do something in just the right way, bad things will happen. But that is not what baptism is about and the amount of water doesn’t matter and who does the baptism doesn’t matter. Baptism is not magic. It is not about the right words or ingredients that we do. No. Again, baptism is about **God’s** action in symbolically saying, as God did so long ago in the story of Jesus’ baptism, this one too is my beloved!

A third mistake that sometimes gets made about baptism is related to this. Baptism is not a fire insurance policy. There is a strand of thinking in the history of the Christian faith that has said that one indeed must be baptized in order to not be

consigned by God to hell. And lest you think that that is a long-forgotten point of view, I was once interviewing a potential Christian Education staff applicant several years ago who said his goal would be to make sure that all children – including toddlers – knew about Jesus – so far so good! – because if they didn't, and they didn't confess their sins and be baptized, God would regrettably but nonetheless surely send those children to hell. I did not hire that person. And Disciples in our history have rightly rejected that sort of thinking. After all, think about what such a belief means: that God a God of infinite grace and love, a God whom Jesus said loves little children with fierceness, would nonetheless consign those children to eternal misery because they hadn't said the right words or done the right thing or had parents who invoked the right ritual. Again, this is both treating baptism as if it were some sort of magical thing, and it also treats it as something that is our act, our responsibility, our work that somehow forces God to do something. And, my friends, that's not a life of faith, but of fear.

So, if those are three mistakes about what baptism is, what can we say on the positive side? Our scripture from Acts this morning can give us some guidance; it's a small part of the story of where Paul and his companion Silas were imprisoned on charges that could have actually led to their deaths. But in the middle of the night, an earthquake throws open the jail doors and they are freed. But their jailer is terrified because the rule of the day was that he was personally responsible and if they escaped he would have to die - and he was indeed preparing to kill himself. But Paul stops his hand – *“do not harm yourself!”* – and tells him not to fear; the jailer then believes and takes Paul and Silas to his home where, the story says, he “washes their wounds,” his

whole household was baptized, and then they ate. Now, what does this story tell us about baptism? Several things: First, baptism is always good news. It is always set within the context of the things we fear. Life **is** hard sometimes, life **is** fearful and sad sometimes. Life **is** made up of difficult choices and things that come our way that we didn't want or expect. And baptism is always the affirmation, then, that the promise of new life is stronger than the deathly things that would seek sometimes to drown us. And it's no accident, it seems to me, that the story also takes pains to emphasize the "washing of the wounds," for that too, is what God offers in baptism. It is not the promise that we won't be wounded again, for we will, but it **is** the promise and reality that whatever wounds we suffer, God is there to keep the hurts from drowning us, to keep the wounds from infecting and spreading and killing our souls and our spirits.

But there is a second thing that is important to note in that story, and that is the element of repentance. Now, we may conjure connotations of that word that are distasteful; maybe our first thought is the street preacher at Tejon and Pikes Peak whose every third yelled word seems to be "repent," or maybe we hear in our heads too many mean-spirited voices that seem to take glee in our sinfulness. Even so, I think we need to rehabilitate the word. For you see, baptism is not the guarantee that we will never do bad, dumb, hurtful things ever again. We will. For even though baptism is God's act and God's gift, **our** part of the equation is to **accept** the gift. Which means that in our deciding to be baptized we joyfully say that we *are* sorry for what we have done that is hurtful or harmful, but that we know that God wants always to forgive us and to offer us new life and new hope and transformation in every moment. As one preacher says, our decision for baptism is precisely our acceptance of our

...hope in Jesus Christ – a hope that we are loved, we are valued, and we are worthy of God. The world tells us we are not, that our sins and shortcomings define us; but Jesus tells us that we are children of God. Jesus calls us to repent and turn back to God... We are to love ourselves because God loves us. God chooses us, again and again, and again.¹

To “repent” is simply to acknowledge our shortcoming, and then to accept God’s offer of forgiveness and God’s promise that hope and new life are always possible indeed.

So, to sum up: baptism is God’s act and gift of grace not our doing, baptism is not magic that has to be done “just right” in order for God to accept it, baptism is not some sort of “insurance policy” because such a view makes God into a divine despot. Baptism **is** about new life and washing our wounds and pointing us toward the future; baptism **is** God’s promise that our repentance of our sins and our desire to seek to be better people will always be met with forgiveness and hope for new life. But I cannot close without also noting that all of that sounds so very, well, *earnest*, and the Christian life is never solely about duty and earnestness and seriousness. No, through our baptism we signify that we want to be a part of an adventure, we want to be a part of a life that is exciting and full of zest and joy. Writer Anne Lamott captures this so very well when she says this: baptism is

...about full immersion, about falling into something elemental and wet. Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not

¹<http://rev-o-lution.org/2014/01/03/worship-resources-for-january-12th-2014-first-sunday-after-the-epiphany-baptism-of-our-lord-Sunday/>

going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's also holy, and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched.²

"And get drenched"! My friends, with joy let us echo those words of that child: IN THE HOLE HE GOES! Let us indeed be **drenched** with the knowledge, the sure and certain knowledge, of God's ever-abiding love and care and desire that we live well and joyfully and always, always in hope. May it be so.

²From Anne Lamott's Traveling Mercies, quoted at <http://www.stpaulcathedral.org/files/2011-12-04%20A%20Thomas--Advent%202--A%20Baptism%20of%20Repentance.pdf>