

“Your Baptism is a Sacrament”

Salado UMC—Preaching Text: Acts 19:1-7

Baptism of the Lord/First Sunday after the Epiphany

10 January 2021

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“The Baptists’ basic theology is that if you hold someone under water long enough, he’ll come around to your way of thinking. It’s a ritual known as ‘Bobbing for Baptists’ ”

(A. Whitney Brown, *The Big Picture*)

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Today is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday—a day when the church thinks about baptism and its meaning. Plainly, baptism is a divisive issue that modern churches discuss—even here in Salado. The dispute is as old as denominations. Baptism is supposed to make us “brothers/sisters” in faith, as when we say “Brother Jimmy” or “Sister Gaye.” Yet, we know people are overly zealous in their understanding and interpretation of baptism. They appointed themselves as the “baptism police.” Their so-called spiritual gift is to tell others whether or not their baptism is valid. Regrettably, this situation has been with us for years.

Years ago, I taught the senior high Sunday school class. One Sunday, several were crying. I asked them what was wrong. They said some kids at school had told them they were going to go to hell. The Methodists had not baptized correctly. So, I asked, “So you think that being baptized in a certain way will send you to heaven or hell?” They thought about it for a moment and said no. Then and there we started to talk about baptism because sometimes what you don’t know can hurt you.

Honestly, we can divide the evidence between scripture and tradition on believers’ verses infant baptism (or immersion verses sprinkling). To be forthright, too many voices in the baptismal conflicts speak as if what they say is self-evident. If you do not see things their way, then you are a heretic. If baptism was as clear as people suggest, then our dispute has no footing over the last 1500+ years.

I like the way the Baptist and Methodist preachers handled a conflict over baptism in a West Texas town during the depression. In the 1920s money for the church's mission was bleak. So, two preachers colluded to keep their churches functioning. They had a brilliant plan. Each August as church attendance was at its lowest point, they arranged "home and away" baptism debates. The Baptist preacher presented believer's baptism and the Methodist preacher took the other side. One week they debated at the Methodist church. The following week they held the great debate the Baptist church. Like now, the controversy over baptism raged between the adherents of each church. During August the town talked about "whether or not my preacher can whup your preacher." The debates packed the churches. At the end of August, the preachers split the ample offerings. They balanced each churches' annual budget. Did they prove anything? Perhaps not, but they did manage to turn the whole town into one giant Sunday school class each August. Hear the day's baptism:

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them (Acts 19:1-7).

Acts tells us that Paul affirms the linking of the Holy Spirit and baptism. Baptism is a sign of God's unmerited love for God's creatures. For this reason, Methodists call baptism a sacrament and not an ordinance. A sacrament is a sign of God's self-giving

love. An ordinance is people's response to God. In a sacrament, everything depends on God, whereas an ordinance depends mainly on a person's response. Because we understand baptism as a sacrament, we affirm that baptism is something that God does. Let me say this again: Baptism is fundamentally something which God does.

Today, we must overcome two contrary views of baptism. Neither view is bad in itself, but obscures baptism as God's gift. Baptism is never a product of our striving. Rather, baptism is always God's gift. These two ways of understanding baptism are by the mind's Enlightenment's logic and the heart's Pietistic feelings. In the first, we are ready for baptism when we know enough or, "we understand what we are doing." Of course, if somebody asked us to explain why we love someone/something, we might falter. How can we give a logical account for divine love? For example, David loved his son Absalom, despite Absalom's efforts to kill and dethrone him. In fact, when he hears his son's death, David emits a curious response. 2 Samuel 18:33 reads: **"The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!'"**

Chad Davis tells about visiting a North Carolina penitentiary. He watched day after day as fathers called on their jailed sons, sent away because the sons refused to see them. But the fathers kept returning, despite the sons' refusals. Perhaps the fathers hoped that someday the sons would receive them (*Will Willimon's Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No. 1, p. 9). We cannot explain this kind of devotion via human logic. Enlightenment reason cannot help us fully understand God's grace.

Second, pietism suggest understanding through our feelings. Yet, how we feel about something is not necessarily how important it is. How would our world function if we waited for people to feel like it before working? I am trying to remember when I "felt like" taking out the trash. Some things in life are too important, that is until we feel a certain way about it for it to happen. When God baptizes us, God tells us that God

claims us no matter how we happen to feel about it on any given day. Baptism is forever as far as God is concerned.

John Wesley writes of a theological doctrine called “Prevenient Grace.” This is God’s grace running ahead of us. It meets us in situations where we need grace and may not even realize it. God works in us and others long before we know or feel like we need God. Occasionally, people call this happening the Holy Spirit. In the sacrament of baptism, whether you are 2 or 92, whether some preacher immerses, sprinkles, or pours water upon you; God comes to you and claims you as God’s own child. This is God’s gift of Baptism and the Holy Spirit. I guess one way to sum up is simply to say: “God works in us and through us, often in spite of ourselves.” Amen.

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