

## **“Baptized for Life” (a sermon for Baptism Renewal)**

Luke 3:15-16,21-22 and Acts 19:1-6 (NLT)

By John Gill

Throughout my ministry, in every congregation I have served, I have been approached by people about the possibility that they might be “re-baptized.” Some were baptized as infants, and regretted that they had no memory of their baptism. Many were baptized in other Christian traditions and wondered if they ought to be baptized as a Methodist. Others were able to recall their baptism earlier in life, but because they now understand much better about the Christian faith, they are eager to do it again so it would mean more to them. A few even had doubts about whether they had ever been baptized at all.

Today is the Sunday in our church year when traditionally, the focus is on the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Therefore, I feel it may be helpful this morning to reflect on the meaning of our baptism. And I also decided that, this morning, we would offer everyone worshipping with us (in person or on-line) the opportunity to renew their baptism, if they wished. We’ll be doing just that at the close of our service today.

Our texts for this morning are both from the pen of St. Luke. The first is the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. The second is another baptism text Luke reports in the Book of Acts, where baptism is the theme, and both John and Jesus are referred to – drawing a distinction between the two.

As I said: throughout my ministry I have found myself explaining over and over again that we in the United Methodist Church do not practice “re-baptism. So, it is ironic that our scriptures this morning (especially the one from Acts), seem to – not only approve of rebaptism – but require it! What’s going on here? Let’s wrestle with this text.

Have I been wrong all these years? Other denominations practice re-baptism, but not United Methodism. In fact, we insist that re-baptism is bad theology. Let me explain why.

The argument against re-baptism goes something like this:

From our United Methodist perspective, baptism represents the fact that, in our coming to faith, God always takes the initiative. As scripture says, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Even before we know we are lost in our sin, God seeks us out, and we respond, or not. When we do respond and claim the gift of salvation, we enter into a relationship with God, a covenant of mutual fidelity, not unlike a marriage. In a covenant, pledges are made by each party. The pledge God makes to us, his side of the covenant, can always be relied upon. God will never go back on his word. When the covenant of our Baptism is broken, then, it isn’t God who’s at fault. The unfaithfulness rests with our side of the covenant. We “sin and fall short of the glory of God,” as the Bible reminds us. The relationship is broken because of our sin and our rejection of God.

Sometimes a person breaks the vows of baptism and lives his or her entire life estranged from God. But thankfully, like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, many of us "come to our senses," repent of our unfaithfulness, and desire to restore our baptismal relationship with God. When that happens, - when you or I have a fresh experience of God's grace in our lives, - it is understandable that we might desire to be re-baptized.

But that's not possible. Why? That's because the pledge God made to us at the time of our baptism has never been revoked. We may have turned our back on God, but he has never turned his back on us. Therefore, to re-baptize someone (as well-meaning as it may be) would actually call into question the fidelity of God to be true to his word. In essence, it would be like calling God a liar, that his promises can't be trusted. Instead of seeking re-baptism, we United Methodists insist that we need to reclaim our baptism by renewing our vows through a service of baptismal renewal.

Does that make sense? I think it does. And I believe that it's right.

But here is this story from Acts: Paul has encountered a group of believers in Ephesus who say they have already been baptized, but Paul goes right ahead and baptizes them all over again! Is Paul suggesting that we ought to re-baptize folks? What's going on here?

Before we can answer that question, a little background information would be helpful – Paul makes a distinction between baptism in John's name, and baptism in the name of Jesus. Clearly, we need to understand a little more about the origins of our Christian sacrament:

Baptism is such a central part of the Christian faith experience that most Christians don't realize that our practice of baptism is derived from our Jewish forebearers. Worship involving washing with water was an integral part of the Jewish faith in Jesus' day, as it is even today for some Jewish groups.

The practice of washing represented a ceremonial act of purification, by which a person's sins or ritual uncleanness was washed away. The special immersion bath, called a "mikveh" was often connected to places of worship. In fact, the mikveh was so important in ancient times it was said that providing a mikveh for a village should take precedence over the construction of a synagogue. In the ruins of the Temple complex in Jerusalem, archeologists have uncovered several of these ritual baths used by worshipers and priests before entering the Temple.

But there were other uses for these immersions: Women traditionally went to the mikveh following their menstrual period and before resuming sexual relations. The waters of the mikveh symbolically purify - they are seen as waters of rebirth. Therefore, wedding couples go to the mikveh before being married to be purified and to pray for fertility. All Jews are expected to go to the mikveh before Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement); and those who are especially faithful would go every Friday before Sabbath begins.

So, our Christian understanding of baptism as a “cleansing of sin” is drawn directly from the Jewish practice. But what about the Christian understanding that baptism is an act of initiation for new believers . . . isn’t that unique to Christianity? No. When a person wishes to convert to Judaism, one of the many things he or she is required to do is to be immersed in a mikveh.

So Christian baptism is akin to the ritual washings of the Jewish religion. But Paul wasn’t referring to these mikveh rituals in our text. He was calling into question “the Baptism of John.” What was that all about?

John was an odd fellow, as you might recall. Dedicated to God as a baby by his parents, he lived like a wild man in the desert eating locust and honey. He certainly wasn’t part of the Jewish establishment, nor was he in a position to observe all the customs about ceremonial cleansing. And yet, he also drew upon the mikveh practices of his people. But instead of performing these immersions in the prescribed settings of the Temple or synagogue in private, John called people to a baptism of repentance out in the open – mass baptisms in the River Jordan. And, while mikveh immersions were usually self-service and routine, John took it upon himself to become the agent of these baptisms to mark them as unusual acts of faith indicating an exceptional act of repentance.

So, we can see how our Christian baptism owes a great deal to John, as well.

But, is baptism in John’s name the same as baptism in the name of Jesus? That seems to be the question our text raises. If they are the same, then why did Paul insist that these men of Ephesus be baptized again? It seems clear that, at least in Paul’s understanding, they were not the same. If that is the case, then in what ways were the baptism by John and the baptism of Jesus different?

When I spent time reflecting on this question, I was amazed at just how different the two are, considering they have so much in common!

In the first place, John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for sins. It focused on sorrow for our sin and was a plea for God’s mercy, lest we be cast into hell as we deserve. It was motivated by fear and by the threat of judgment. Certainly, Christian baptism is also symbolic of repentance for sins and a plea for mercy, but it is far more than that. Baptism in Jesus is also a sign of our forgiveness and a celebration of God’s grace that has freed us from the judgment we deserve. That’s why we call it a Celebration of Christian Baptism. It is a time of Joy and Hope, not a time of fear and remorse.

In the second place, John’s baptism, like the mikveh immersions of the Jews, was a repeatable act. In fact, it had to be repeated periodically in order to deal with any sin and impurity that may have infected their lives since their last ritual cleansing. It only dealt with past sin, and had no impact or implication for the continuing sinfulness of their lives, except to implore them to avoid sin. In contrast, Christian baptism does not need to be repeated, because it applies, not just to our past sins, but it addresses all sin in our lives, past, present and future. As it says in

scripture, "Christ died once, for all." This means that when we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, all our sin has been dealt with. We don't need to be re-baptized any more than Christ has to be re-crucified. When we fall back into sin (as we inevitably will), all we have to do is repent, ask forgiveness, and trust God's promises that we can be forgiven and that our baptismal covenant can be restored.

A third important difference between the baptisms of John and Jesus lies in how they reflected belief in the coming Messiah the prophets had foretold. John's peculiar baptism in the Jordan River was more than just a call to repentance. It was an act with eschatological implications (that means it looked to the day when God would finally send his Messiah and establish his eternal reign on earth). That's why it was essential that Jesus submit to baptism by John, as a declaration that the time had come for the Messiah to be revealed. But most of those baptized by John never recognized that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, nor did they perceive that the eternal kingdom they longed for was available to them in the here-and-now. They didn't know that it was possible to experience eternal life in this life. But Christian baptism proclaims not only that Jesus is the Messiah, but that, through our baptism, we can enter into the eternal life now, a new life in Christ that continues beyond our death. Baptism for Christians is a spiritual birth, an initiation into the kingdom of God, a foretaste of heaven on earth.

But I think the most significant difference between the baptism of John and that of Jesus has to do with the evidence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the one who has been baptized. Clearly, that is precisely the reason Paul required these so-called "believers" to be baptized again....there was no evidence of the indwelling of God in their lives. They had only gone through the motions of repentance and belief, but their lives had no spiritual fruit. They had head knowledge of God, but no experience of God in their heart. To paraphrase the words of our baptismal ritual, they had been baptized by water, but not by the fire of the Spirit.

And that is the reason their baptismal experience was faulty – because they did not understand that it is in baptism that the Holy Spirit of God comes to dwell in the heart of the believer, that baptism is a sacrament of the church, whereby we experience the real presence and power of Jesus resurrected in our hearts, changing us from the inside out. These men of Ephesus had to be baptized again because their first baptism wasn't a Christian baptism at all! They had undergone a baptism into death, not a baptism into eternal life!

Years ago, there was a horror movie, entitled "Night of the Living Dead," a film about a day when the unburied dead were unexplainably reanimated and roamed around killing the living. Thankfully, I never saw that movie, but it was very popular, and so I heard about it.

Several years later a sequel was released, "Dawn of the Dead." Again, I chose not to go to that film either, but the movie critics on television focused on a particular scene of that film in which the zombies were roaming mindlessly through a shopping mall. Two living, breathing men had been sneaking around and studying the habits of these zombies and one man asked the other, "Why do they come here? What are they doing?" The other man replied, "Going to the mall is

something they recall from their living days. They are now dead and it has no meaning. It's just something they do automatically."

For many people, their baptism has no meaning. It was something they did (or their parents did for them), simply because it was the thing to do. They did it automatically. But there is no fruit to show for their baptism. They are just spiritual zombies, the "Living Dead," who are just going through the motions of the Christian life.

When Paul looked at those men from Ephesus, it was obvious to him that they were like the living-dead. But Paul shared with them the good news about Jesus, baptized them into Christ, and everything changed. They had been trapped in the "Night of the Living Dead." But now was the "Dawn of the Dead" – to life! The Holy Spirit took up residence in their hearts and they experienced new life in Christ!

Could it be that there are some listening to this message today who have experienced the water baptism of John, a baptism in form only, but have not experienced the presence of the living Christ, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Could it be that you are one of those Living Dead, longing for the Dawn?

Well, today is your day to make it right.

In just a moment, we will enter into a time of celebration of baptism. You are welcome to participate as you feel led by the spirit.

My friends, this morning, we will not be doing any "re-baptisms," because, if you have ever been baptized, the promises God made to you are just as fresh today as they were then. Instead, we will invite you to reaffirm your baptismal vows.

It may also be that there are those who may never have been baptized, or have doubts about whether you have ever been baptized. If so, please be in contact with me and we can take care of that in a future worship service - so that we can all witness this important moment in your life.

The good news is that you no longer have to go through life like the Living Dead. Let today be the Dawn of your new life in Jesus Christ!