
Child of God
Wesley Mimico United Church
October 18, 2015
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:35-45

Don't you just love a great baptism like we just had. Baptisms are such an interesting mixture of elements. We invoke the intangible spirit ... using ordinary Mimico tap water. We connect together through the laying on of hands, while we take a step back from present reality by using ancient words and actions whose origins are lost in the mists of time. Baptisms are simple and complex. Traditional and completely off the wall. A good baptism is a lot like life.

As much as I enjoy baptisms, I just might enjoy preparing for baptisms even more, talking with the “to be baptized”, or in Jamie's case, with her parents, Steve and Patti. One element of that preparation is when I ask the person, or the parents: “So, what does baptism mean to you?”

And I love asking that question because I usually get one of two responses. Sometime I get a look that says, “you're the minister, don't you know this stuff? Just how flakey is the United Church anyway?” More often, I get a different look. The “deer in the headlights” OMG: “you mean I need to have an opinion here? Isn't baptism a rite just like a birthday or something? Is it supposed to mean something?? And why does it matter what I think baptism means anyway.”

And just for the record, I do know what baptism means. I didn't fail *worship* class at seminary. (Ask me later what class I did fail) But to properly do a baptism, I have to understand what the recipient thinks it means too, and then we go from there.

Baptism is a logical result of the idea that even though we are all children of God, as the saying goes, “God does not have any grandchildren.” Nobody is born a Christian. Today - not in Jesus's day of course - baptism is the official ritual that publicly declares entry into the global Christian Community. Beyond that, baptism is a good opportunity to support each other. Each of us - as well as people who have not yet entered Jamie's

life - can be part of her growth and nurturing. And that support can last long after the event of baptism is over. Even in adulthood - in this congregation - many of us help and nurture each other. We support each other in various ways. That's one thing that it means to be a member of the global Christian Community.

That simple definition of baptism hides many interesting traditions of course. If we go back to the gospels to get a sense of what baptism meant in the time of Jesus, it is clear that only adults were baptized, because baptism was a public sign of a person's faith, and infants cannot profess faith. In the United Church, we baptize infants, adults, or anybody if it seems appropriate. When we baptize infants, we ask the parents to make their own statement of faith, as you just witnessed.

And in case you imagine that we baptize anybody who is appropriate because we are just so gosh darned open minded, I should point out that infant baptism is the consequence of a medieval superstition that declared that non-baptized people went to hell if they died - a position not supported by scripture. I follow United Church protocols and will do infant baptisms, but the historical roots of infant baptism are grounded in superstitious fear, not in inclusive theology.

Another interesting thing about baptism is the water. Do we need special water? Should we do full-immersion, or is a sprinkle enough? I told Steve and Patti I was prepared to do Jamie's baptism today in Lake Ontario, but they were not keen on it for some reason. Full-immersion : putting the person completely underwater briefly has a lot of good symbolism. Pushing them under the water is symbolic of death and burial, and pulling them back up is symbolic of resurrection and new life. But in our tradition, a sprinkle is enough.

On a completely related note, we need to talk about weddings today too, because baptisms are like weddings in many ways. Weddings are great, of course. But as most of us know, the ongoing marriage, with its ups and downs, is the real event. A wedding - important though it is - is just a public declaration. A wedding is a moment. A marriage is - or at least can feel like - a lifetime.

Think about it. Would you rather have a wonderful wedding ceremony followed

by a toxic marriage, or would you rather have a disaster wedding followed by a wonderful marriage? I don't think we need a show of hands on this. Marriage is the point of a wedding, not the other way around. Similarly, baptisms are great, but the real deal is : what will Jamie do with her baptism, and what do we do with our own. Being a child of God is the point of baptism, not the other way around. And what are the essentials of being a child of God and of “Christian living?” Amazingly, “Christian living” is very similar to proper living according to a number of faith traditions. And Jesus laid it out for his disciples in our reading today. Being a child of God is serving others. Jesus’s mission was to serve others, not to be served. Sounds simple. But it can be a little harder to put into practice.

Today we will - symbolically - celebrate both these aspects of Christian living. Both aspects of being a child of God. We have already celebrated a baptism. Now, we just need to celebrate the “service” aspect of being a child of God. I wonder how we should do that? You will notice in the bulletin there is a heading called “Something Wonderful Happens Here.” That's where the celebration of service will come in. And that celebration will involve someone a little bit older than Jamie.

First, we will sing MV 157 “I am a child of God”. And then, we will have a very special presentation from the UCW to a child of God in our midst: Deen.

Amen.