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Christ has no body now but yours  
Martin Grove United Church  
January 13 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:14-17 and Luke 3:15-17 21-22

How time flies. Last week we were celebrating the magi visiting Jesus as a baby, and this week we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. Don't forget, Jesus was probably about 30 years old when he was baptized, so we have covered a lot of ground in the last 7 days. I hope we didn't miss anything important!

In any case, I'm very relieved. I found it very confusing talking about the magi last week, discussing whether they were scholars, or magicians, or kings, or wise people, or mythical figures. This week should be much easier, don't you think? Baptism is the one sacrament that all Christian groups share in common, and besides, what could be simpler - you have water. You have a person. Boom. Done.

I hope that everyone here today knows that isn't quite the case. I hope that each of us has experienced a variety of Christian traditions ourselves, and that we know that baptism isn't quite that straightforward because baptism practices vary between churches. Here are some obvious questions around baptism that you might have from visiting churches with different traditions:

Q: What does baptism mean:

A: It means you become part of the Christian community, or that you become Christian, or that you are saved. I think all Christians pretty much agree on this.

Q: Do you have to use water?

A: Absolutely. Unless I'm mistaken, every single Christian tradition requires water for baptism. Of course in most traditions, in an "emergency", exceptions can be made. In an emergency, non-authorized people can perform a baptism, using the wrong words and the wrong liquid, or in fact no liquids at all, as long as they did it with honest intentions and inform their minister/priest as soon as they can.

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Q: Do we need special/particular water?

A: Here, we start to see differences of opinion. Some churches use holy water. Some churches use holy water with oil added to it. Some churches use water from the Jordan River (or at least add a few drops). Here at Martin Grove, the source of the water is very important. It is vitally important that we use regular tap water in honour of the idea that the water symbolizes the spirit. The spirit is important, the water is not. The United Church usually discourages any practices around baptism that evoke superstitious thinking. Oh - and the water should be lukewarm, but that is just for comfort.

~~~ a short digression ~~~

The question of whether or not we need special water for baptism actually is very old. The importance - theologically - is this: to what extent do we practice baptism as a symbolic action, leaving room for the spirit to do its own work, and to what extent do we practice baptism as if it is actually magic, as if there is actual power in my fingers and that baptism is something we do ourselves. This actually came up in our reading today from Acts 8, except that the authors of the lectionary cut out the really good bits.

Reading from a bit from ahead what we read earlier: Now a certain man named Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. (Acts 8:9-13).

And then, from immediately after our reading, Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for

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your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness. (Acts 8:18-23).

Simon (not the disciple Simon) who was already a well-recognized magician realized he could make a lot of money baptizing people, and offered to pay the disciples to learn the trick. But Peter said to him, this isn't a magic trick. And it's nothing that people should pay for anyway. But the idea that baptism is really magic is a hard idea to break. I have found that people who are not very religious at all sometimes want their children baptized for superstitious reasons. I have actually spoken with parents who say, "We don't believe in God or anything, but can you please baptize our child just in case?" And I say, "in case of what?". And they answer, "in case hell is real". And I say, "Oh, hell is real all right, and you don't have to die to go there." There are people still who think a splash of water - without any associated change of heart - makes a difference to God - that's a notion of a very small God indeed.

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Q: What do you have to do with the water?

A: Here's where it really gets interesting. Some churches practice "full-body immersion", meaning that the person is completely submerged in a large bathtub, or a body of water. Some churches only ask you to completely soak your head. If you take a look at the size of our font you will know that we "sprinkle" water here, usually making 3 passes, one for God, one for Jesus, and one for the spirit. But I am being completely serious when I tell you that I will be more than happy to perform a baptism in the Humber River if the occasion should arise. Oh - and there is one other thing we have to do with the water here at Martin Grove United Church. We have to pour it. And while we pour it, we listen/feel for the flow of the spirit.

Q: Should babies be baptized?

A: Some churches practice "believer's baptism", and so don't baptize infants, because they cannot speak for themselves. Many churches baptize infants, with the understanding

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that the child's parents will raise them with Christian ideals. In the United Church we usually baptize anyone who asks, following the belief that baptism is an act of the spirit, and therefore it is not ours to control. And when we baptize infants, it is with the hope that the children will grow up and attend confirmation classes around age 13 and then be confirmed. Incidentally, we call it "confirmation" because the youths are invited to "confirm" the faith statements that their parents made on their behalf earlier.

I have done a number of baptisms as a minister, and I can tell you I really prefer to baptize adults, because we usually have very meaningful conversations prior to the baptism event.

Q: Do you need to use special words?

A: Yes. The accepted words are "I baptize you in the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit". The only permitted variation is "holy ghost" instead of "holy spirit". The words are fixed, and that leads to the advantage that there is only 1 baptism. The Roman Catholic Church would accept my own baptism as valid because these words were spoken. There was a time in the United Church when people experimented with different words. The word "father" is no longer a good substitute for the word "God" in many churches, including this one. However, baptism is not ours, it belongs to the global Christian community, so I will only use the accepted words.

Q: Can you be baptized more than once?

A: In general, no, because the spirit has already done its work. Some churches, instead of confirmation (where the youth confirms what their parents had said) simply re-baptize the youth, this time letting them speak for themselves. Nothing in the Bible prevents re-baptism. In the United Church we do not generally re-baptize anyone because we choose instead to honour their first baptism. The only time I knowingly re-baptized someone was because they could not get any record of their baptism (from a then-long-closed United Church) and needed proof of baptism in order to get married in a Catholic Church.

Q: Who did Jesus baptize himself?

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A: Nobody. Jesus left the actual task of baptizing others to his disciples. Just like today.

Q: Did Jesus “institute” baptism?

A: According to church tradition, Jesus “instituted” baptism. To institute means to start or cause a system, or a rule, to exist. The idea is that even though Jesus didn’t baptize anyone, he commanded it to be done.

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The 4 gospels give us 4 accounts of the life of Jesus. In 3 of the gospels, after Jesus was resurrected, he spent time with the disciples, until a later time when he headed to heaven. This gave Jesus the opportunity to pass on some final instructions, which we call “the great commission”. Jesus gives a commission to the disciples in Matthew, Luke, and John. In Luke (and in Acts, which was written by the same author) Jesus states that all people will be called on to undergo a change of heart for the forgiveness of sins. Luke then outlines the geographic expansion of this mission from Jerusalem, to all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, which is the plan carried out in the book of Acts. In Matthew the great commission is a call to make disciples of all people, to baptize, and to teach. And in John, Jesus bestows the holy spirit on the disciples and confirms their authority to forgive - and to bind - sins.

In the words of the Jesus Seminar Scholars, “These commissions have little in common [with each other], which indicates that they have been created by the individual evangelists to express their conception of the future of the Jesus movement. As a consequence, they cannot be traced back to Jesus. ... Jesus probably had no idea of launching a world mission and certainly was not an institution builder.”<sup>1</sup> But however it came to be, baptism is the recognized sign/symbol of joining a/the Christian community.

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Q: What questions does anyone else have about baptism?

I said earlier that baptism is the mechanism we use to allow people to join the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Five Gospels*, pg 270.

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Christian community. What exactly does that mean? In practical terms, if you are baptized in this congregation, you become a member of this congregation. But it's really more than that. Joining the Christian community is about adopting a Christian faith, and faith is all about how we live our lives. Jesus spent his ministry engaging with people, healing, and teaching, and we are all called - through baptism - to do the same. We are called to heal the wounded world, to see as Christ would see, to journey with the poor, to give back to those in need. You don't need to be baptized to do that - you don't even need to be Christian - but baptism is the Christian call to do just that.

Embrace your own baptism. Embrace your own call to be "as Christ would be" in our world today. Remember - Christ has no body now but yours.

*Amen.*