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Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

### **“Baptism 101”**

I was reminded recently that when people choose to leave a church, most of them end up staying at home on Sunday morning. It's a myth that people leave one church for another church, one where the programs are bigger or the preacher is better or the music is peppier. When people leave they simply leave and stay home. They stop going to church altogether.

Why? Well, there are probably multiple reasons, including the desire to have a lazy Sunday morning at home before the Monday madness sets.

But I think one of the reasons people stay home is because they don't see a reason to go to church. Church doesn't have any bearing on their lives; there's no connection between the hour they spend in church and the other 167 hours of their lives. Sunday doesn't connect to Monday.

Which should really come as no surprise to us; because many people don't understand the basic elements of our faith well enough to find it interesting or useful, let alone apply it to their day to day decision making. Countless surveys, for example, show that most Protestants believe, contrary to what the Reformers taught about being justified by grace through faith, that we must do something in order to be saved . . .like be baptized.

Two or three generations ago, the church could rely on the culture to teach some of the basic tenets or Bible stories, because church attendance and membership was valued. Kids learned the Christmas story by singing carols at school Christmas programs. Good Friday was a day off from school. Families said grace at dinner, thereby teaching a basic element of prayer. But for the most part those days are over and the emerging generation will not give their time to something that has little impact on the rest of their busy, over scheduled lives.

Now, I suppose we could wring our hands over this and cry “ain't it a shame”. And in some ways it is a shame. The last I checked saying grace at dinner never hurt anyone and, as Anne Lamott says, there are worse things for kids (or adults) to do than spend time with people who love God; and are trying to love God back by loving other people, even people who are rather unlovable.

But there's got to be a better way to respond to the changing times than hand-wringing or turning the clock back to 1962, which was about the year church attendance began to decline.

There's got to be a solution.

What's the church to do, my friends?

Well, the church can begin by teaching some of the basic stuff again, stuff like baptism, for example, which is the focus of today. Why do we baptize? What does it mean? Is it our ticket to heaven? What's unique to Presbyterian baptisms? What does our baptism have to do with our every day lives? Even for those of us who have been around the church for decades, a little refresher course on what baptism is and is not wouldn't hurt. And it especially wouldn't hurt here, where some of you are life-long Presbyterians, some of you are Jewish, others of you are former Catholics, some of you were Unitarians, others Church of Christ, and still others Christian Scientist. You are a motley crew if I ever knew one!

So what is this sacrament we call baptism? And what's it have to do with Monday morning?

Well, in a nutshell, here's what baptism is not for Presbyterians:

1. Baptism is not your ticket to heaven.
2. Infant baptism does not make a baby a Christian.
3. And private baptisms are a no-no.

First, the ticket to heaven. Some of you may recall that years ago, just after 9/11, a woman called me out of the blue requesting that I baptize her daughters, pronto. Grown daughters, mind you, who she had not consulted about being baptized. She wanted them baptized because if something were to happen along the lines of another 9/11, she wanted to make sure they were going to go to heaven. And baptism, she believed, was their ticket there.

After I explained to her that Presbyterians don't really believe that, she told me in a not-so-polite manner that she would take her business to the Baptists down the street.

Friends, baptism for Presbyterians is not the equivalent of a Monopoly get-out-of-jail free card. We believe God loves you whether you are baptized or not, and that salvation is God's choosing. But baptism is a recognition that God is already at work within the one being baptized. To use a churchy phrase, it is visible sign of an invisible grace. God's grace has already been extended; baptism is the way we respond to God's grace

This is also one of the reasons why we don't do private baptisms. We believe responding to God's grace is best lived out in a community of faith. We also believe that the best way to learn how to be a Christian is to come to church and be with other Christians. But we also know that the journey of faith is hard, which is why the congregation makes a promise to help guide and nurture the newly baptized, whether he or she is an infant or an adult. It's also why we don't normally have godparents in the Presbyterian Church because, in essence, the whole congregation acts as godparent when they make a promise to help guide and nurture the newly baptized.

Now, some of you may have been surprised to hear me say that being baptized does not make a baby a Christian. Truth be told, it was something I hadn't really thought about until reading about baptism in *Presbyterians Today* magazine, which made just that point. Infant baptism is the beginning of one's journey of faith, but it's really not until confirmation when teenagers confirm the promises their parents made on their behalf that one publicly professes faith in Christ for the first time. This is probably why back in the old days when I was growing up we didn't take communion until we had been through communicants' class. We no longer hold to that practice, but I'm guessing that's where that practice originated.

But the more I've thought about this whole idea of infant baptism not making a baby a Christian, the more it makes sense to me. I mean, I know people who were baptized as infants but haven't stepped foot in a church since then. Are they more of a Christian than an adult who, maybe hasn't been baptized, but faithfully attends church and is trying to discern if their journey of faith is leading them to make a public profession?

See, I don't think it does. If it did, then baptism as a sign of God's visible grace would amount to what Bonhoeffer referred to as cheap grace, a grace which costs nothing. Baptism would also be reduced to something that needs to be done, our ticket to heaven, if you will.

But baptism is so much more than that. If we're baptized, our lives should reflect it. We should be doing good works, and not because we have to earn God's grace, but because doing good things is the way we respond to God's grace. It's how we reflect God's love.

See, here's the thing, in our baptisms God claims us as God's own. Just like God said to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased," God also says, or said, that at our baptisms. Baptism teaches us who we are and whose we are. We are God's beloved children. We belong to God's family. And as members of that family, it's our duty to care for other members of it.

When Jesus stepped into line with everyone else getting baptized by John, I think he was symbolically showing that in his ministry he was going to care for all of God's children. Why else would he stand with a bunch of sinners who were there seeking God's forgiveness, other than to stand in solidarity with them? When the people lined for baptism, and he lined up with them, he was saying, "I'm here with you, to help care for you, and to show you that God cares for you, too."

But Jesus' baptism by John signifies something much deeper, than that, too. If Jesus had been baptized by the priests-those with authority-he would have been beholden to those in authority. He would have to have been obedient to the Roman Empire. He would have to have called for the continuing establishment of that kingdom. His allegiance would have been with them.

But instead Jesus did something very radical. He went to John to be baptized, who was also a radical and someone far outside the inner circle of power. The first thing Jesus did

in his public ministry was identify with the sinners, which carried far deeper than what may appear to be so at first sight. When Jesus went to John he declared his allegiance to God and God's kingdom and to building God's kingdom.

See, if we just think of baptism as something we have to do to get to heaven, we miss the point that baptism is a two way street. It's our way of publicly responding to God's grace, but we're also making a promise to God. In our baptisms we promise to reject evil and its power in the world, and when we do that we promise God that we'll step back into the world when we leave here and work for God's kingdom the other 167 hours of the week.

You know, there's a lot of emphasis these days on the liturgical practice of remembering our baptisms. Every time we baptize someone or accept new members or ordain elders, we're called to remember our baptisms. But here's the thing, I don't think it's enough to just remember. I think we should live them; with purpose; we God's beloved children, called and sent to make a difference in the world." Our baptisms should make a difference in our lives so that we can make a difference in the world.

Amen.