

## Baptism: Living Symbol of the Christian Life—

### Following Jesus and Being the Beloved

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H. Stephen Shoemaker

This season, Lent to Easter, let's ponder Baptism as a living symbol of the Christian life. It is, in my mind, the most complete and comprehensive symbol of our faith, even more so than the cross. The cross may be the most essential single symbol of our faith as it represents Jesus' death as the poured-out love of God for us and for all. But Baptism is like the facets of a jewel which depicts the many meanings of our life in Christ.

During these days I want to spark in you what one has called "a baptismal imagination", that is, to help you imagine your life and all life through the lens of Baptism in all its meanings. Such meanings include:

Following Jesus

Being the Beloved

Turning

Washing

Belonging to a Family of Faith, the Body of Christ

New Birth and New Creation

Anointing, Holy Spirit and Calling, and finally,

Dying and Rising

I'm speaking of the baptism of your minds and hearts. All through the Bible, God's spokespersons have sought to move our most important rituals into matters of the heart. In our Ash Wednesday scripture Joel said, "rend your hearts, not your garments". Isaiah said, Make your fast acts of compassion for others. Jesus' sermon on the Mount's main theme was making the commandments a matter of the heart. And Paul speaking of the Jewish requirement of circumcision spoke of the "circumcision of the heart". So, this season, let's talk about the baptism of our hearts and minds.

## I

The topic may make you a little squirmy. For one, Baptism has become too often in the history of the church more a symbol of exclusion than inclusion.

You had to be baptized to get in, and it had to be *our* way of baptism. So, the *form* of baptism—*how much* water and *when*—became more important than the *meaning* of it! Some are baptized by the bucket-full and others by the thimble-full. I don't think God cares. I heard of an Episcopal priest who in order

not to muss up the beautiful baptismal gowns of the infants in his church misted the infants with a perfume bottle sprayer. I baptize you, squirt, in the name of the Father, squirt, and Son, squirt, and the Holy Spirit, squirt. (I don't think that happened!)

So baptism also became a symbol of division not unity. Jesus prayed that we, the church, may be one! And Paul pleading for unity in the early church said, "There is one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism." (Ephesians 4:5)

In the beginning the church baptized mostly adults, those who had chosen to join the Jesus movement. Then the church adapted "infant baptism" as its major practice. Then came Anabaptists in Europe who said that "believer's baptism"—the baptism of one who had chosen to follow Christ—was the only true baptism. For this they were reviled, persecuted and killed. Then later, Baptists returned the favor by not accepting any baptism but their own as valid.

I pastored one church ousted from the local Baptist Association because it honored the validity of all baptisms. There are a number of such renegade Baptist Churches so ousted. One Body?! One Spirit?! One Lord?! One Father?! One Baptism?!

Grace Baptist honors all baptisms. And Grace does not require baptism as a requirement for becoming a “Member” or “Covenant Participant.” So it follows that we invite all, of all ages, to participate in the Lord’s Table at Communion. Our Communion Table, then, becomes a symbol of inclusion, not exclusion, and of one of our core values: The welcome of all people and the radical hospitality of Christ.

Having said that, I would also hope that we value Baptism as a beautiful and joyous expression of our faith. Valuing baptism, in my mind, would mean encouraging our young people to be baptized before they graduate and leave home. And it would mean asking new Covenant Participants—if they have never been baptized in any form—if they would like to explore being baptized, not as a requirement but as a spiritual opportunity.

Baptism should never be coerced or feel coerced. It is something we should be drawn to, not pushed to. There is a huge spiritual difference between being pushed and being drawn. We push, the Spirit draws.

So, again, this series of sermons is not designed to drag anyone to the water. I’ve never successfully baptized a cat. The primary purpose is to help us imagine our lives through the lens of Baptism, toward the baptism of our hearts and minds.

## II

For today, let's focus on two meanings of Baptism: Following Jesus and Being the Beloved. First, Following Jesus.

Baptism signifies that we are followers of the way of Jesus. In a very concrete way we are retracing his steps.

In his 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritual classic, *In His Steps*, Charles Sheldon tells the story of a minister, Henry Maxwell. He was in the process of preparing then preaching, a sermon on I Peter 2:21:

For this you have been called because Christ died for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

As he was preaching that Sunday, a homeless beggar, who had come to this house the day before, appeared at church and at the end of the sermon walked to the front and began to speak. He told of his plight and how many Christians refused to help and asked what it meant, then, to walk in Jesus' steps. He then collapsed and, a few days later in the week, died.

The next Sunday the deeply shaken pastor got up to preach and offered this spiritual challenge, a kind of spiritual experiment. For one year, he said, let's agree to do nothing without asking, "What would Jesus do?" And let's, he added, meet in small groups weekly and talk together about how we are doing.

I do not think the answer to this question is as simple as it sounds, but I do not think we go far as followers of Jesus without asking that question.

The first meaning of Baptism is Following Jesus, one way of retracing his steps. As Jesus was baptized, so I will too.

So let's look at Jesus' baptism. He was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, a one-man-renewal movement in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism. John's baptism was radical because it was for *all* and because it was *free*. It brought God's grace out of the temple into the streets, beyond the walls of the temple and its religious regulations.

He was calling the whole nation to return to God and be baptized as a sign of this turning and as a sign of God's flowing forgiveness. It was a washing, cleansing in water, a ritual Jesus would understand.

Jesus came to be baptized as a sign of his identification with and solidarity with all humanity in their need of God and in their need to turn, change and be forgiven. And it was a sign of the beginning of his mission: the preaching of the kingdom drawn near in mercy and power.

The earliest words Christians said as a baptismal vow at baptism were: *Jesus Is Lord*. It had a deep spiritual meaning. It said, "My life will center around

his life.” It said, “he is Lord, not I.” The ego was no longer at the head of the table, Christ was. And it said, “He is Lord and no one else!”

The baptismal vow thus had also a political meaning and carried with it danger. The Roman Emperor required that all citizens in the Empire vow: “Caesar is Lord!” But Christians, sometimes at the risk of their lives, refused to bow their knee to Caesar, only to Christ. Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

So the first meaning. In baptism we walk in the way of Jesus. We follow him, and we make him the center of our lives.

### III

Now let’s move to the second meaning of Baptism: Being the Beloved. We saw it at Jesus’ own baptism. As he came up out of the water, the heavens were opened, the Spirit descended as a dove, and a Voice said: “You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased”, or as I like to translate it, “in whom I take delight.”

Jesus may have felt his Belovedness from his mother’s arms. At the heart of his spirituality was what we could call his “Abba-experience”, his experience of himself as the Beloved of God whom he called *Abba*, poppa. The intimate address of a child to a perfect, loving parent.

But now at his baptism God spoke into his heart his Belovedness. This is the meaning at the heart of our baptism too: receiving into our depths this word from God: “You are my daughter, my son, the Beloved.”

“In whom I am well pleased”, God added. In whom I take delight. God takes pleasure in you, delights in you.

The term “well pleased” may carry the connotation: “I’ve done something right, and now God is pleased with me.” But the words carry a deeper, more profound meaning: God takes delight in you, in you, not because you’ve done something right, but because you are the Beloved.

One of Sue’s favorite theologians is Mr. Rogers. Here are the lyrics of one of the songs on his show:

It's you I like,  
It's not the things you wear,  
It's not the way you do your hair--  
But it's you I like  
The way you are right now,  
The way down deep inside you--  
Not the things that hide you,



Not your toys--

They're just beside you.

But it's you I like--

Every part of you,

Your skin, your eyes, your feelings

Whether old or new.

I hope that you'll remember

Even when you're feeling blue

That it's you I like,

It's you yourself,

It's you, it's you I like.

Gordon Cosby once said that *the chief duty of a parent is to enjoy their child*. A parent's enjoyment of their child conveys a delight in them, which also, I believe, conveys the most elemental experience of grace.

In the movie *Chariots of Fire* Eric Liddell, a young Scottish man, has given his life to be a missionary in China, but he has interrupted his preparations to be a missionary in order to train for the Olympics as a sprinter. His sister was not pleased at this delay in his missionary training and told him so. Eric said to her:

I believe God made me for a purpose, that's China. But he also made me *fast!* And when I run, I feel his pleasure.

I hope there are days when you feel God's pleasure. Perhaps when you are doing exactly what God has created you and placed you here to do. Or perhaps in those moments of bliss, like on a walk when you feel the sun on your face and the wind in your hair and you feel the pleasure of God. Or, when you are holding another, or being held. When you are being most deeply *you!*

A priest from Detroit visited his uncle in Ireland. It was his uncle's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. One morning before dawn they went for a walk along Lake Killarney. They stood side by side and watched the gorgeous sunrise. Suddenly his 80-year-old uncle turned and went skipping down the road, radiant, smiling ear to ear.

The nephew said to him: "Uncle Seamus, you really look happy!"

"I am lad," his uncle replied

"Want to tell me why?" his nephew said

The uncle replied "You see, me Abba is very fond of me!"

So, I now add, is your Abba fond of *you!*

At baptism I often say to the one about to be baptized: As God said to Jesus, hear those same words spoken to you this day: “You are my daughter, son, The Beloved, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I take delight”.

Let these words resound in the deepest part of your being. You are the Beloved. Let these words replace all the negative counter-scripts you have been told about yourself, and what often tell yourself. This is your truth! You are the Beloved.