

Church of the Holy Apostles (Episcopal-Roman Catholic), Virginia Beach, Virginia

Prepared by Deacon Tony Asalone for Jan. 15, 2012

SERMON MARK 1:4-11

The Episcopalian liturgical calendar designates this day as one especially appropriate to baptisms.

This morning we planned to have a baptism of a male baby.

Let's assume that baptism went ahead as planned, then a legitimate question could have been raised.

What have we done? We have taken an innocent child and initiated him into the Christian Faith. The child is now committed to a life as a disciple of Christ. How can there be a commitment on this child's part. He is totally unaware of what just happened. Nevertheless a commitment has been made.

The commitment is ours. The parents, and the Godparents and our community have made a commitment on behalf of this child. It is their and our responsibility to raise him as a disciple of Christ. That means by word and deed we are committed to help this child ratify this Baptismal commitment when he is an adult.

We cannot take this responsibility too lightly. By participating in this rite of initiation we have made an irrevocable covenant with Christ to do our best to help this child make a fully aware commitment to Christ.

So how do we fulfill our responsibilities toward him?

The parents need to make sure he is given the proper Christian instructions and act as Christian role models. Children learn more from our actions rather than our words.

As a community we must provide the time and resources to help the parents teach the child about Christ and his call to discipleship.

Now that I have laid a heavy responsibility on our shoulders let's take a look at baptism in general and Christ's baptism specifically.

We start in the first reading where we have a representation of God's action in the creation of the universe that I feel is related to Baptism.

The image presented in the first two verses in Genesis is very beautiful. Visualize the image as I read vs. 1 and 2 in a slightly different version.

“¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

The Spirit of God was hovering over the chaos that was the earth. Creation is suspended awaiting a magnificent act. Suddenly with the speed of thought God creates order through the action of the Holy Spirit. God has made a new creation.

In a sense this is what happens when we are baptized. The Holy Spirit descends on us and brings order to our personal chaos. We are a new creation in Christ.

As we move to the Gospel we read that Jesus is baptized by John. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized by John? John was baptizing people who were repenting from their sins. Jesus was sinless. Why would Jesus who is sinless need to be baptized?

William Barclay suggests four reasons:

“It was the moment of decision for Jesus.” He spent 30 years in relative obscurity preparing himself for this day. The coming of John the Baptist was the trigger. Many people were coming out to John, confessed their sins and were baptized. Jesus saw what was happening and as a result He recognized that his time had come to begin his ministry.

“It was the moment of identification.” Jesus wanted to identify himself with the movement of people back to God. His willingness to be baptized by John reinforced the idea that John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord.

“It was the moment of approval.” The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. He heard a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

“It was the moment of anointing.” He was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and was thereby equipped to begin his ministry and also to be able to resist the temptation of the Satan.

I believe there's another reason that Jesus was baptized. It was a special gift from God. Jesus' baptism helped establish a rite of initiation for future Christians. Jesus began his ministry after he was baptized. In the same way when we are baptized, we are a new creation in Christ and our ministry begins.

Like Christ baptism is a moment of decision for us. Of course most of us were baptized as children and had no choice at that time. However, as we grew older, we had opportunities to renew our baptismal vows as we will do today. We renew that moment of decision. Our personal chaos is once again put in order by God. Once again we become a new creation.

Like Christ, through baptism, we identify with and become part of Christ and his ministry.

Like Christ, we receive God's approval when we hear these words in our heart, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Like Christ, at baptism we are anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit. We receive those gifts of the Spirit that God has given us for the good of the world.

Like Christ we are called to use those gifts to bring the kingdom of heaven to this crazy world of ours.

Unlike Christ, we sometimes forget what our true purpose is here on earth, which is to learn to love God with all our heart, our mind and our strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's why it's so important to repent of our sins and renew our baptismal vows periodically.

Unlike Christ, we sometimes forget how much we are loved by God. He says to us over and over again, "you are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Unlike Christ we get discouraged trying to do our best to follow Christ. We don't see what good we are doing. This can be especially painful when a child is baptized but as an adult decides not to follow Jesus. We feel like failures.

I like to tell you a story that might help our discouragement.

40 years ago Helen and I held a prayer meeting in our home for some of the neighborhood kids. We met every week and it went on for years. It was a wonderful experience for Helen and I and we used to call this special time and place Camelot. Time went on and the kids became adults and scattered. We lost touch with most of them and we did not know if what we did had any impact. This Christmas however we got a Christmas card from one of them living in the state of Washington. This is what she wrote after 40 years:

"Helen and Tony, Merry Christmas to you. I wanted to let you know how much you've always meant to me even though I don't see you these days. Thank you for your presence in my life, (since back in the days of Camelot). I hope all is well with you. Love Elaine."

So my friends, as we enter this new year, and renew our baptismal vows let us do our best to follow Christ wherever he leads and when we don't see any results and get discouraged, take courage in the fact that we are truly and unconditionally loved by our wonderful father in heaven. He sees our efforts and knows the results and he says to us, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Amen

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