

**January 13, 2019**  
**"The Baptism of Christ"**  
**(Edited for publication)**

Every so often I receive a call with a request that still, after all these years, I must admit, rankles me, and the request goes something like this: "Hello, pastor, my name is (here insert name), my mother/sister/friend, told me that you would be willing **to do my baby.**" Rankling me even more are those occasions when the request is rather bald, like this: "I need to have my baby done," no introduction, no "my name is."

Yes, that's exactly the way it is said, "do my baby." I don't recall the first time I was asked this, many years ago, nor do I recall my reaction. I suspect I simply asked, "Do you mean have your child baptized? And, often enough, the answer would have been something like, "Yes, christened." (Not "baptized," mind you.) I have learned over the years that when I am asked to "do a baby," the person means to officiate at the Sacrament of Christian Baptism, though in my sillier moments I imagine some arcane ritual in which we run around the sanctuary counter-clockwise, holding the baby aloft while singing Mary had a little lamb.

In my saner moments I know what I'm being asked, and I now do several things. First, I ask if they would make an appointment to come in, the parents and sponsors-- -and I have to explain that sponsors means godparents, and I sometimes even go so far as to explain why we use "sponsors," instead of "godparents."--- so we can talk and get to know each other. I then attempt to explain why I'm asking this, and I tell them the reason is that our understanding of the Sacrament of Baptism is that it is a Sacrament of the Church, and the congregation is asked to promise love and support for the family and the child, and I cannot ask that in good conscience, nor can the congregation answer that, if we don't know the family and the child. And, that would mean that we would want you to attend our services of worship and get to know you.

At that point, I usually lose them, since I've started talking about things other than "doing the baby," such as church attendance, sponsorship, the meaning of sacrament, life in the community of faith, etc. Then comes the next

part of the conversation in which they explain that their family is coming from Florida/Virginia/Maryland, etc., to be here for “the doing of the baby,” and it’s really important. What follows varies from person to person: sometimes there is anger, sometimes hurt and confusion, sometimes they simply hang up, and I...I’m left with a clear sense of being the Ebenezer Scrooge of the Sacramental life.

And, that invariably leads me to give thought to what **we** really do believe about the Sacrament of Baptism. What does it mean for us, for those of us who count this as our “home,” who gather here when one of our children is baptized, and we are asked to make a public confession of faith and an affirmation of our willingness and desire to love and support the child and the family? Does it mean for us that race, gender and class, have been dismantled by God, declared illegitimate by Christ’s baptism and ours. Does it mean for us that we are being engrafted, moved and placed together in the one body in spite of our perceived differences. A part of the meaning of baptism is that in Christ we seek the “other”, care for the “other”, respect the “other”, serve the “other,” even though we may strongly disagree on theological or social or political issues or find the other person not to our natural liking. Does it mean for us that when we are baptized in Christ, there is no longer married or single, African American, Caucasian, Chinese or Korean, clergy or laity, evangelical or high church, Liberal or conservative politically, theologically conservative or theologically radical, Methodist, Southern Baptist, American Baptist, independent fundamentalists, young people or the elderly, the clever or the ignorant, lawyer, doctor or laborer, the clean or the unclean, social justice people or spiritual retreat people, life-long Christians or new converts, straight or gay people, orthodox or heretical, millionaire or pensioner. All signifiers of difference are made null and void, all barriers to human congress are broken down, all those invidious ways we have of distinguishing ourselves over against the “other,” all are banished, washed away in the blood of the Lamb.\*

And, do we take at all seriously the blood of the lamb, and our cleansing in that blood? Do we recall the lyrics of that well-known gospel hymn familiar to so many of us, with it’s powerful images of being “washed” and cleansed, images redolent of the waters of baptism:

Are you washed in the blood,

In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?  
Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?  
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

And do we attach any importance at all to our adoption by virtue of the baptism of Christ? As the voice from heaven attested, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And that takes us back to the message of the season just past, the message of the incarnation, God with us, Emmanuel, God with skin on, skin that was washed in the Jordan, skin that was broken and bruised, skin that could hurt, skin that died and was buried, skin that arose from the dead, was touched by Thomas, and pronounced real and alive, and skin that has offered to us that same promise of life everlasting and abundant. Do we believe that? Do we believe that the word from heaven came to us in our baptism and confirmation, and comes to us still, again and again, that we are beloved children of God? Is that part of our heart and mind and soul and body? Do you still believe and trust that you are one of the beloved?

It is all-too-easy to become bogged down in sectarian arguments about the validity of infant versus believer's baptism, and those arguments, and concerns, arise frequently when the baptism is taking place in a family which is making a transition from one faith tradition to another. These arguments render the sacrament a mere matter of individual preference, or familial desire, and the overarching power of the Sacrament is lost.

Baptism as a sacrament is, we say, a "visible sign of the invisible grace of God." When we come to know the power of that grace and know it not just as an item in a list of things to be repeated by rote, but as the overwhelming power of God in our lives, when we've been dragged through the miseries of loss and grief, when our expectations for love have been dashed, when all hope seems to have vanished, and suddenly grace appears and lifts us to the heights of joy...then we begin to know ourselves truly as the beloved children of God, as sisters and brothers of Jesus of Nazareth, our older brother, that God is as pleased with us as with Jesus of Nazareth, then we can begin to embrace the power of baptism and understand ourselves as the bearers of the Good News, as joyful and loving sisters and brothers in Christ.

Perhaps, then, there is something of genuine substance, some truth, in this business of “having our babies done,” and what is being asked of us should not be dismissed out of hand, just because it rankles a bit. Perhaps there is the invisible sacramental work of the Spirit, to which we confess, that is “doing” something, and perhaps we all, now and again, need to be “re-done,” “re-spirited,” “re-lived,” “re-vitalized,” made new and whole again, and I think that is the real meaning of the Sacrament of Christian Baptism...life abundant in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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\*My thanks to one of my colleagues for some of the language in this paragraph.