

First Presbyterian Church of Grand Haven
January 10, 2010

Scripture lesson:
Acts 8:14-17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria (some-air-e-ah) had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When I served a church as a ministry intern, the Pastor, Jennifer Lewis, was preparing to baptize a 4-year old girl named Colleen and Colleen's baby sister. On Saturday, the day before the baptism, Jennifer arranged to meet the children and their parents at church to explain what happens in baptism. She was just walking into the sanctuary when little Colleen rushed over to her and exclaimed breathlessly, "Oh thank goodness you're here, because I don't know a thing about this!"

I wonder how many of us feel the same way, even years and years after our baptisms? So here's a question: if someone asked you to explain what you believe about baptism, what would you say?

The Church liturgical calendar marks today as Baptism of the Lord Sunday. And although the scripture lesson I just read is taken from the common lectionary, it might not be the passage we so often associate with Christ's baptism. It is not about John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River.

This scripture lesson is also very short – only three sentences (okay, so maybe some of you are hoping this sermon will be just as brief!) The passage may be brief, but Luke manages to use these four little verses to show a monumental shift in the movement of the early church as it spread the message of the Gospel. It is set during a time when the focus of the church is

beginning to move outward from Jerusalem to regions beyond. Ironically, because the early Christians are being persecuted so violently in Jerusalem, followers of Jesus are beginning to proclaim the story of his life, death, and resurrection in other places.

One of those places is Samaria. We remember that the Jews hated the Samaritans, and viewed them as unclean and inferior. As people who were technically Jews, but just massively did not get it. I'm not sure how as modern American citizens we can really grasp, on a gut level, just how shocking it would be to the people of Israel that Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, or stayed in a Samaritan home, or used a parable with a "good" Samaritan as the hero of the story. With the benefit of the bigger picture, *we* know that Jesus had a history of hanging out with, as Akma Adams writes: "a motley circle; drunks, extortionists, women (both notorious and righteous) lunatics and pagans, [who] figured prominently in the stories of who Jesus was and how he passed his time." To the Jews, however, Jesus passing his time with Samaritans was just plain appalling.

Yet, in the 8th chapter of Acts, when the followers of Jesus scattered and "went place to place, proclaiming the word," Philip goes to evangelize Samaria: the land of unclean and inferior people. He preaches the gospel, heals the sick and casts out evil spirits, and the Samaritans embrace what Philip tells them. The scripture goes on to say, "When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit."

And here we run into a conundrum: with a sense of throwing on the brakes, we hear: "for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Huh! Now, what we believe, confess, and rely on in baptism is that the Holy Spirit is very *much* present in baptism, and that the baptized person receives the Spirit at the same time as the

water of baptism, just as Jesus did when baptized by John. So why does this baptism seem to have two parts? And I can't help wondering just what Jesus might have to say about that "only in the name of the Lord Jesus" bit!

But looked at another way, this passage has something important to say about baptism. In the first place, it tells us God works outside of anything – any limits, any conditions – we humans seem so set on placing around God. God's love and desire to make each and every one of us God's own child is wonderfully, *thankfully*, beyond our scope of understanding. We have no words for how much God loves us, how much God desires to be in relationship with us. As the Psalmist writes, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me."

God made a covenant with us that God's grace is available through certain means such as baptism, yes, but God is not restricted to acting through any one practice. This is not to minimize the importance of baptism – far from it! What I mean to say is that God's spirit falls on whom God wills, much as we try to place conditions on this wonderful, reckless grace.

And if God's reckless grace is not restricted by time or ritual, neither is it restricted by human loyalties or boundaries. When Philip preaches to the Samaritans, and the apostles lay-on hands and pray for them, they transgress boundaries and barriers of race, religion, and culture. The idea of community is opened, and widened, and made inclusive. This passage shows God calls us to be baptized into a relationship with God, but as Peter and John demonstrate by their haste in going to Samaria to join Philip, we are also called by our baptism into relationship with each other.

In baptism we learn who we are: God's own beloved child. In community we learn what that means.

My friend Doug Brouwer is a Presbyterian minister and an avid runner. As a matter of fact, Doug ran his first marathon in his late 40s. He also belongs to a running club that gets

together on Saturday mornings for a group run and some socializing. Most participants didn't know each other before the group was formed, so it's also a good way to make new friends.

One Saturday Doug was jogging along behind a young man he hadn't really gotten to know, so Doug caught up to him, and they exchanged names and what they did for a living, etc. Doug decided that a good way to make a new friend is to disclose something about yourself, so he said, "You know, as I was running today I was thinking about how much I enjoy this, but I also know I'm not getting any younger, and I was wondering just how many more years I'm going to be able to run, and frankly, the thought made me a little sad. So, what do you think about while you run?"

And the young man said, "See that girl up ahead? I was thinking if I just ran a little faster I could probably catch up to her."

But before he ran on, the young man said to Doug: "So you're a minister, huh? You know, I consider myself a Christian, but I have to say I don't have much use for church – you know, institutional religion, and all that."

Soon after Doug told me that story, a baby was baptized during a worship service at my church. Now, if you've spent any time at all in a Presbyterian Church, I'm sure you can tell me exactly what happens when an infant is baptized. The front pews were filled with friends and family, and an elder presented her for baptism on behalf of the Session. After the baby's parents made promises to live out their Christian faith, and to teach it to their child, the minister turned to the congregation and asked some very important questions. He asked if we promised to guide and nurture the baby by word and deed, with love and prayer, and encourage her to know and follow Jesus Christ. Not only that, we pledged to help her be a faithful member of our church community.

After she was baptized, our minister carried her around the sanctuary, through a sea of loving faces welcoming her as our new sister in Jesus Christ. And following the worship service, as the air smelled of coffee and cookies prepared by the deacons, and Sunday school teachers made a dash to their classrooms, folks gathered around the family, cooing at the baby, and taking pictures.

And I thought, “THIS is ‘institutional religion!’ THIS is the church! This is the community we are baptized into: faithful Christians who love, pray for, nurture, and educate, feed, and comfort one another as the body of Jesus Christ!”

We live out our baptisms in community.

Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ, a way of fully identifying with Christ’s death and resurrection, and too, it is repentance and washing away of sin. But it is also a promise. As a statement by the World Council of Churches says: “The Holy Spirit ... implants in [our] hearts the first installment of [our] inheritance as sons and daughters of God.”

What little Colleen and her sister received with their baptisms was like a seed planted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. When God claimed them as God’s own, God through Jesus Christ bought the land of their hearts, so to speak, and planted the seedlings of eternal life – life they will one day fully possess to the glory of God.

The truth is, Presbyterians traditionally baptize children, not because the child needs to repent, but because the life of faith is a process. And we each need our whole lives to live out that process. When God claims us, we begin a journey: a journey always leading *out* into relationships with others, and ever *upward* toward God. When someone is baptized in the church, we are more than witnesses; we are participants. I promise to nurture and guide others as they are incorporated into the body of Christ, just as it was done for me. The Holy Spirit uses the Church to nurture a life of faith.

Within the church we learn how to live out our baptism.

But friends, at some point there must be a movement, a natural progression, if you will, from learning how to live out our baptism within our own community to being and doing our baptism in the wider world. We can't separate what we do together *in here* from what we need to do *out there*. Just as Philip, Peter and John baptized and blessed a marginalized people, so we too are called to bless those whom Jesus would have – shockingly – passed his time.

When we do what we are baptized to do, we are performing scripture. Just as Jesus embodies God for us, so we are called to embody to others the God we know through Jesus Christ. I said earlier that we have no words for how much God loves us, but that's not entirely true. The word we have for how much God loves us is Jesus. The word, so to speak, is The Word of God.

Jesus was baptized in solidarity with us, and we, in solidarity with Jesus and with gratitude to God, follow Jesus as his disciples. And Jesus leads us to those the rest of the world wants to forget: the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the unloved. God sent Jesus into our messy and sinful humanity not to erase all suffering, but to become entangled in it. Through Jesus, God shows us *Emanuel* – God *with* us. And Jesus – as the human face of God – shows us not only how we are to be in relationship with God, but also how we are to be in relationship with one another. The relationships we form, the community of Christ we inhabit, ought to communicate something vital about God's relationship with us.

So, who, exactly, belongs to the community of God? When we think of our community, just who all is included? And who gets to say what it means to be the Church in the 21st Century? What do the faces look like as they gather around the baptismal font?

How we define the Church of Jesus Christ makes a very profound statement to the world around us today, and in the future. Did you know the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church

says, “The Church of Jesus Christ is the *provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity?*” In other words, we are called to show the world what God wants it to look like until Jesus comes again. Can you imagine? What an amazing calling!

So let me ask you again: if someone asks you what you believe about baptism, could you answer? If you know what it means to be baptized, are you willing to live that meaning out in a community of believers? And finally, does your life match up to what you believe, moving you from *learning* to *doing* to *being* your baptism until Jesus comes again?

Amen.