

Whenever I'm asked to do a baptism, I meet with the family beforehand, if it's a child. If the person asking is an adult, I also request some time to talk about what baptism means to them and why they want to be baptized. Baptism is a central part of who we are. For Lutherans, it is one of our two sacraments. Martin Luther recommended that we make the sign of the cross every morning upon waking and every night before sleeping – as a reminder of our baptism. And for Luther, this was no small matter. After his trial, when he had been declared a heretic and an outlaw, an edict went out making it a crime for anyone in Germany to give Luther food or shelter and allowing anyone to kill him without legal consequence. Escaping under the protection of Frederick III of Saxony, Luther hid out in the Wartburg Castle. In the isolation and anxiety and loneliness of his exile, it is said that he would often scribble over and over on his desk, "I am baptized." What did baptism mean to Luther that made those words such a comfort in the midst of trial and tribulation?

I've often wondered what he would have had to say to the family I once visited (not here) who asked to have their baby baptized. They were members of the church only tangentially. One of the grandmothers an aunt and an uncle were members. So I went for the pre-baptism visit. The living room was crowded with people, friends and family, eating and drinking, making plans for the big day: the baptismal outfit, the flowers for the altar, the brunch afterwards. It wasn't the best venue for a heart-to-heart conversation about the meaning of baptism. But I gave it a try. I asked the parents, "What does baptism mean to you; why do you want to have your baby baptized?" The mother answered very sweetly, "It's so she'll be able to get into heaven." I have to admit that I was flummoxed. I'd been teaching and preaching for so long about baptism being about relationship, about being in community, about forgiveness and recognizing our belovedness in God – that I was taken aback by this idea of baptism as a 'get into heaven free card.' What would Martin Luther have done? Probably kicked everyone else out and lectured the parents. I didn't do that. I baptized the baby, went to the brunch, left the rest in God's hands.

That's where we get criticized by the proponents of adult (or believers) baptism. And if you're going to have a discussion with such proponents, you'd better have an understanding and appreciation for infant baptism that's about more than being able to get into heaven.

When it comes to baptism these days, we really do need to be on our theological toes. As I said in *Keeping in Touch*, this Sunday that celebrates the Baptism of Jesus brings forth several quandaries for progressive Christians. Another one I listed is: how to we counter those who insist that unless the traditional words 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' are used, the baptism is not valid?

There are those who believe strongly in this. A former theology professor of mine has said that those who want to use alternative names to 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' are 'enemies of the church' and he strongly implies that they are heretics.

Countering that view is Ruth Duck, professor of worship at Garrett Theological Seminary: "Liturgical use of 'Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and the Holy Ghost,' and 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' became more rigid and formulaic . . . as a result of theological debates (in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries). Use of formulas has been required to demonstrate orthodoxy of belief and validity of sacraments.

But if the real task of trinitarian language is to open us to the reality of the God made known in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, we may need to go deeper than formulas to find the language of witness, thanksgiving and praise.”

Now you may wonder why I'm going into this theological ping pong game. As you know, our church council has been working on our constitution and getting it ready to send to the synod council for approval. This does not imply that their acceptance of our constitution means we've rejoined the ELCA. It is simply a step we have to take. You may or may not know that the biggest challenge we have in the constitution is the issue of trinitarian language. There are places where we would change 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' to something more inclusive. But as you can see from the two positions I just quoted, it's a theological hot potato. Is the synod ready to pick it up? We shall see.

More important, though, is asking ourselves how the language in which we baptize does open us to the reality of the God made known in Jesus through the Spirit. In other words, what does it mean to you to be baptized?

Perhaps a story illustrates it best. This story is told by Janet Wolf, who used to be the pastor of Hobson Methodist Church in Nashville, TN. She describes that congregation as wildly diverse, including “...people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets; and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, ‘those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.’”

In the course of her ministry, a woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism, described by Pr. Wolf as “this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone” especially grabbed Fayette’s imagination. During the class, Fayette would ask again and again, “And when I’m baptized, I am...?” The class learned to respond, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ Fayette would say, and they’d go back to their discussion.

The day of Fayette’s baptism came. Baptism was done by immersion, and this is how Pr. Wolf describes it: “Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, ‘And now I am...?’ And we all sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘Oh, yes!’ she shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall. Two months later, Pr. Wolf received a phone call. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. Pr. Wolf went. She said, “I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When I got to the door, I heard, ‘I am beloved....’ She turned, saw me, and said, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and....’

Catching sight of herself in the mirror - hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and re-buttoned askew, she started again, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and...’ She looked in the mirror again and declared, ‘and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’<sup>1</sup>

I think Martin Luther would have said, “Yes, oh yes!”

Jesus heard a voice from the heavens, as he came up from the water, "You are my Beloved, my Own." Those words are powerful words, no small matter. Spoken from the power that would exude from his teaching and preaching and his very life. Spoken to those he met and included and healed and loved.

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<sup>1</sup>Wolf, Janet, 'The Upper Room Disciplines 1999' (Nashville: The Upper Room).]

Beloved. Beloved Jesus. Beloved Martin. Beloved Fayette. Beloved – insert your name here because you too have been named by God’s grace with such power that it won’t come undone.

Now how will we live in such a way that others will know themselves as beloved - especially those who have been given cause to think they are less than loved? This weekend we remember the birthday of Martin Luther King, who so often spoke about his vision of the Beloved Community, in which he saw the role of the church as promoting a way of life rather than a belief system.

He said, "Jesus always recognized that there is a danger of having a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds."<sup>2</sup> He stated that Christ is more concerned with how we treat our neighbors, our attitudes toward racial justice, and living a high ethical life than with long processions, knowledge of creeds, or the beautiful architecture of a church.<sup>3</sup>

Beloved brothers Martin – who remind us that our calling as baptized children of God is both highly personal and essentially communal. Each of us is known and loved – personally - by the Divine Presence that permeates everything in the universe from the vastness of space to the inner cells of our bodies. You are beloved. And – we are brought together into a community out of whose corporate identity comes the desire to bring wholeness and healing to others and to the world. We are all beloved.

Does this mean we will never face trying times, never experience doubt, never be rejected? No. Just ask Martin Luther. Ask Martin Luther King. Ask Sister Dorothy Stang who was murdered in 2005 in Brazil because of her efforts on behalf of the poor and the environment. Just ask Jesus.

But does it mean that you and I can say each day, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’

Yes, oh yes!

Amen

### Genesis 1:1-5

*The first words of the Bible define the true nature of creation as spiritual. The Spirit of God breathes over the waters, shaping and moving them with creative energy. This is a statement of religious faith, not a scientific hypothesis. Written in the 6th century BCE, this majestic hymn describes the divine victory over chaos, a basic element of myths of creation found in most Near Eastern cultures.*

In the beginning

God created  
the heavens  
and the earth.

But the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep -  
yet the Spirit of God was brooding over the surface of the waters.

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<sup>2</sup>King Jr., "A Religion of Doing," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Vol. 6, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Then God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light.

God saw that the light was good; and God separated light from darkness.

God called the light 'Day' and the darkness 'Night.' Evening came and morning followed - the first day.

#### Acts 19:1-7

*The early church regarded baptism in the name of Jesus as a symbol of new creation. The gift of the Spirit confirmed this spiritual experience. In this passage Paul helped the disciples of Ephesus, baptized according to John the Baptist's practice, learn the full meaning of Christian baptism. Most of the people who were baptized in the earliest days of the church were adult believers. When whole families and households were baptized, children were included. The practice of infant baptism did not become the norm until a few centuries later.*

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior of the country and came to Ephesus. There Paul found disciples, to whom he put the question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we were never even told that there was such a thing as a Holy Spirit."

"Then how were you baptized?" he asked.

"With John's baptism," they responded.

Paul then explained, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance; he insisted that the people believe in the one who was to come after him – in other words, Jesus."

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

And the moment Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and prophesy. There were about twelve of them.

#### Mark 1:4-11

*The early church believed that the teaching and the work John the Baptist fulfilled prophecies found in Exodus 23:20 and Isaiah 40:3. A dramatic if controversial figure, John preached repentance and baptism in the Jordan River as the way for Jews of his time to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Then Jesus joined the crowds that thronged to hear John's message and experience. The vision of the Spirit as a dove descending on Jesus after he had been baptized confirmed John's conviction that the Messiah would bring the gift of the Spirit to all believers.*

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but locusts and wild honey.

In the course of his preaching, John said, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie the straps of his sandals. I have baptized you in water; but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."

It was then that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Immediately upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Beloved, my Own. On you my favor rests."

