

“Born Anew”

1 Peter 1:3-9

Think about this scenario that happens all too often: A couple, the wife carrying a baby dressed in pink, walk into the pastor’s office. The pastor didn’t recognize them, but he welcomed them.

“We’ve come to get our baby baptized,” she said, right to the heart of the matter. For the next few moments they began to get acquainted, the pastor and these new parents who glowed with affection for their daughter. They hadn’t met before, the husband said, because they hadn’t been in church since the new pastor had arrived. The pastor pointed out that he’d been serving the congregation for over 6 years. They remembered the pastor who had confirmed them and because they continued to live in the area along with their parents, this was “their” church.

This was the first grandchild on either side of the family so this baptism was going to be “one really big deal,” the very words of the baby’s father. “So when can we get her done?”

Yet again, the pastor knew that he and these young parents were looking at baptism with very different eyes. The pastor began to explain the meaning of baptism, that, from the earliest days of the church, believing parents had brought their children for baptism, so they could share the life of faith with them. Finally he said, “Before we make plans for your daughter’s baptism, let’s talk about your own faith as parents and how you will be practicing that.”

The husband realized this was going down a road he didn't want to travel. He held up his hand and said, "No, you don't understand. We don't want to talk about religion. We just want to get our daughter done. In fact, it's our right."

Did the pastor give in and baptize, even though this was troubling to him? Did the parents get angry and storm out, threatening to take steps to involve other people, either family members or church leaders or asking the former pastor?

This sort of conversation occurs in every church, including our Lutheran churches. Our Lutheran heritage goes back to state church beginnings in Europe, where baptism has often been understood and practiced as a right of the individual; like citizenship is a birthright so is baptism. This practice migrated to America along with the European immigrants. For example, baptism was virtually automatic for a citizen of Norway or Germany who were members of the state church which is Lutheran. In many of the northern European countries, citizenship, plus nearly universal membership in the Lutheran church assumed the practice of faith. In this situation, baptism became individualistic, a formal and dignified naming ceremony. It was the child's right, claimed by the family.

That is why the father in our story said, "It's our right." He's wrong. Baptism is never a right. It isn't something we can claim for ourselves separate from the community of faith or church. It is not automatically ours, like the civil right of voting when you turn 18. We cannot claim it on some personal basis like our family's history in a congregation.

Rather, baptism is a sacrament in which God comes to us and makes us one of his children. God adopts us. Baptism is a gift from our Lord, Jesus Christ that he gives to the church as a way to make disciples.

In the Great Commission at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said to his disciples, the first generation of our faith community, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and I am with you always, to the close of the age.” Baptism and making disciples go together, and the church has the responsibility to use the sacrament in this way.

I knew the Lutheran Church in Europe was headed down the wrong road, when we worshiped in a beautiful church in Augsburg, 10 years ago on a Sunday morning. Our group of 36 outnumbered the members of this congregation at its only Sunday service. The pastor told me he was the only pastor of this congregation with over 4,000 members. He spent his week doing official acts – baptisms, weddings, and funerals. There was no offering during worship because the well-maintained building and well-paid pastor were funded by a church income tax. The more you make, the more the church gets. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals become individual rights you pay for.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with parents wanting baptism for their child. In fact, every pastor is delighted when parents take the initiative

for their child's baptism. Wanting baptism, however, while not wanting the life of the baptized is the problem. Wanting the "rite" of baptism without interest in learning what it means is the problem. "Getting the child done," as the language of some puts it, without commitment to teach the child faith in Jesus Christ, is the issue.

Why is this so? Because baptism is not a one time act but a daily action in how we live in all of our relationships. As God loves us as his children, we love others. As God forgives us in Jesus Christ, we forgive others. As Jesus served all people, so are we to serve others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor martyred in Germany near the end of W.W. II, in his book, "The Cost of Discipleship," argued that the church is often guilty of dispensing "cheap grace." One of his examples was "baptism without church discipline," by which he meant offering the sacrament as a product. He said baptism is not a product or mere ritual, but is a call to daily confess our sin and our need for God.

So it's a good thing if you come to the church to arrange baptism for your child and the pastor says, "Let's talk about Jesus and faith." In fact, you will be living in the grace and power of your own baptism if you give up your supposed "right" to have your child baptized, and instead open yourself up to spiritual growth and understanding. Letting go of your "right" to baptism is permitting Jesus to work on your heart in a new way.

In 1 Peter 1:3-5 its put this way . . . “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

“We are born anew” when we daily open our hearts to baptism as a gift of God – costly, wonderful, and always inviting our response to love, forgive, and serve as we daily experience the mysterious touch of the Spirit of God.

May the peace of God . . .

#455 - Crashing Waters at Creation