

January 11, 2015

TEXT: Acts 19:1-10

TITLE: Spiritual Introductions

I want to speak this morning about baptism – about what we believe happens when we are baptized and why it is at the heart of the Christian faith. But thanks to story we just heard from Acts 19, a bunch of other questions have forced their way into the conversation and need to be dealt with first. So bear with me. I promise this will be a sermon on baptism.

A long time ago, after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and after the great day of Pentecost, the good news of Christianity spread in the lands around the Mediterranean Sea largely by word of mouth. Individual disciples and believers went about telling others about Jesus. They originally were almost all Jews so they started these conversations in synagogues. They would point to passages in the Hebrew scripture, the Old Testament, and insist that the prophecies about a Messiah had come true in Jesus of Nazareth. Some rejected this message; others received it with excitement and passed it on.

Now, did everyone who shared the gospel cover everything from A to Z, Alpha to Omega (if you're Greek), Alef to Tav (if you're Jewish)? Did they teach it clearly enough so that the listener truly understood it? No, of course not. Which means that from the beginning, imperfect presentations of the gospel have been shared by imperfect preachers and become part of the worship life and faith of imperfect congregations. That last statement would make a lousy advertising campaign, but it is true and always has been.

A long time ago, a Jewish man named Apollos heard the gospel, believed it and then traveled across the Mediterranean to the city of Ephesus. There his powerful preaching made new converts. He knew a lot about Jesus, but he only knew about the baptism taught by John. His imperfect, or at least incomplete, message came to the attention of two other Christian leaders in Ephesus – a wife/husband team named Priscilla and Aquila. They quietly corrected Apollos and prayed with him, and then sent him on to Greece with their blessing.

No one understands the entire Christian gospel in one sitting. It is too rich and too deep to be mastered all at once. That is why the life of faith is a lifelong process of study, questioning, and grappling with the big questions while being sustained by moments of grace and fresh insight. Each of us is like Apollos, sharing what we know about Jesus as best we can with others – and yet all of us including me need Priscillas and Aquilas, people who will correct and guide us concerning the things we just don't fully understand. That is one reason the motto of the Presbyterian Church is "Reformed, always reforming." Every person and every church needs to humbly profess "We don't have all the answers and we're not perfect, but we seek to ask the right questions and to trust in Jesus Christ with our heart, mind, body and soul for the journey ahead."

Back to our story. Apollos left for Greece. Later Paul arrived in Ephesus and met up with some of Apollos' converts who didn't yet have the full message about baptism. (See, I promised you we would eventually get around to this topic.) We heard how Paul straightened things out in Ephesus. Let's assume now he has turned his attention to us and is asking ELPC "Why do you believe baptism is so important?" Some of you Presbyterians, the type who like pop-quizzes, will energetically raise your hands and say, "Baptism is a sacrament of the church. It is a washing away of sin and a sign of entry in the church family." As nice as that answer sounds, Paul won't like it because it doesn't mention the Holy Spirit.

So Paul will say, "Try again. Why is baptism so important?" Here's where the story from Acts and our story come together. Because of the influence of the evangelical church in America and the nature of Billy Graham crusades, we have come to believe that baptism is only about repentance; that it involves confessing our sins and, by God's grace, our sins are washed away. But that is an incomplete definition – sort of like the baptism of John that Paul encountered in Ephesus.

As I said earlier, Paul wants us to remember that baptism involves both water and the Holy Spirit. Mark 1 clearly says that John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, yet announcing "I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Now despite how Pentecostal and charismatic churches have tended to interpret what that means, I think our Presbyterian process is a pretty good one. Picture a baptism up here on our chancel. Parents bring a child, or an adult comes forward, and they promise to turn from sin and turn toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. You, as a congregation, witness these vows, even as you promise to teach, nurture and encourage the baptized person in the ways of faith. A prayer is offered, because baptism is not our act but God's act of grace and love. Water is poured on the person as an ancient and holy symbol of this rebirth. And then the gift of the Holy Spirit comes to complete the sacrament. "Hold on," you might say; "I'm not sure I've noticed that part of baptism. I took a lot of pictures at my child's baptism and I don't recall the Holy Spirit appearing in any of the photos."

Well, my Presbyterian friends, the Holy Spirit was there. It was there when you and the baptism partners sensed a new unity as a church family. It was there when the individual or family felt that this sacrament marked a special day – the beginning of a new chapter of faith in their life. It was there when the old ways of living and doing things didn't feel right anymore – and it was especially there when you walked away from that baptism font believing that you need to speak out more and act out more to make this world truly a place of God's power and mercy and justice.

Paul met those twelve disciples in Ephesus who'd only had a baptism according to John. So he introduced them to the Holy Spirit and baptized them in the name of Jesus. Because the Holy Spirit was part of it this time, scripture says that they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Our guide for what this was like is Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on Pentecost, they didn't start shouting nonsense phrases. They went out to the crowds in Jerusalem and spoke in the tongues, the languages, of the people gathered there. They communicated. They told the gospel in a way that connected people long separated by race and language and geography. That's how you can tell the Holy Spirit is present. When Christians or a church discover that people are coming together whom the world would keep apart, the Holy Spirit is at work. Likewise whenever Christians or the church do anything that pushes people apart, the Holy Spirit is absent.

Baptism in the name of Jesus involves water and the Holy Spirit. It has both an inward and an outward quality – inward change and repentance coupled with an outward sense of unity, connection, and loving commitment to God's justice in the world. Two doors open once you are baptized – the inner doors of the church and the outer doors to the vineyard where God sends you to labor in the field of the Lord's harvest. In baptism comes a new creation – the old is washed away AND there is now no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor. All are one in Christ and are to be treated and cared for as such.

The baptism combination of water and Spirit may only take a moment to receive, but it takes a lifetime to live into it. It is there in our baptism commitment to raise children in faith, to get them to Sunday School and help teach their classes so that they too can affirm the questions of faith at their confirmation. It is there when the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak a word of hope and healing to someone trapped in addiction or isolated by others for any number of reasons. It is there when the Holy Spirit guides the former President and Baptist Sunday School teacher Jimmy Carter to say, "Look, if you don't want your tax dollars to help the poor, then stop saying you want a country based on Christian values, because you don't." It is there when the Spirit prompts us to believe that free speech must not be silenced either by terrorist attacks or paranoid government over-reach. It is the way the Holy Spirit calls us to live each day as individuals, as communities, and as congregations dedicated to serving Jesus Christ.

So on this day, remember your baptism – the full baptism talked about by Paul, the one involving water, repentance and that life-changing introduction to the Holy Spirit. For that sacrament is a one-time event that will take your whole life to finish.¹ Thanks be to God.

¹ William Willimon, The Intrusive Word, p. 66.