

## “Baptism”

### *Why do we do that? part 4*

#### *Matthew 3:1-6, 13-17*

[52] Over the last few weeks, our church has been working through a series of messages called “Why do we do that?” There are times we take for granted parts of our worship service. Why do we say the Lord’s Prayer? Why do we say the Apostle’s Creed? Why do we serve communion? It’s appropriate to ask questions in the church – that’s the way we will learn. So we are working through some of these answers together. By the way, all of these videos and transcripts are on our website, hgumc.org.

[53] Today we ask, “Why do we baptize?” Simply put, baptism is the sacrament where a candidate is covered with water by a minister of the gospel who blesses them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. On the surface, it seems like a simple act: just get them wet. However, a deeper understanding can show us how this is a life-changing experience of faith.

For some, baptism is simply a tradition. It is something we do because... well, just because. A seminary professor once told me, a family brought their new-born daughter to his church because it was time to “get ‘er done.”<sup>1</sup> They had no church affiliation, no connection to God, and no real faith, but they knew they had a baby who was supposed to be baptized, and they couldn’t do it at home or at the mall, and they couldn’t order a do-it-yourself baptism kit online.

[54] Baptism is a good thing, and it should make us ask questions. When our first child was born, Katja and I had a significant decision to make: when, how, or even if, we should baptize her. Several dynamics were at play: Katja was from a Baptist church that practiced adult baptisms. I grew up in the United Methodist Church, which allowed infant baptisms, and I was baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church. On Katja’s side of the family, there were agnostics and Lutherans. On my side of the family, there were Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists and Methodists. Talk about diverse theology!

We knew we had to sit down with our pastor and talk and the meaning of baptism. We all needed a better understanding of what we were doing.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Gutenson, United Seminary.

I know there are many different understandings and practices of baptism. Rest assured, my goal today is not to tell you if dunking, dipping, or sprinkling is better. I’m not advising one form over another. Today, I simply want to talk about baptism in our setting and church. My hope is as you leave this place, you will be thinking, “What difference does baptism make in my life?”

[55] The first clear reference to baptism in the Bible comes from Matthew 3, when John the Baptizer appears on the scene. This supports our classic understanding of baptism – it is tied to repentance. People came to John because something was wrong with their lives. They needed to connect with God and they knew “stuff” was getting in the way. John challenged them to change their lives and be baptized as a sign of that change. So we know that baptism and repentance are intimately connected.

[56] Next, Jesus appears on the scene. John knew Jesus was coming – John even claimed that Jesus was so great, John was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals. And yet, the remarkable thing is, Jesus asks John to baptize him. This is the second truth we learn about baptism – it is a sign of humility and obedience.

Finally, when Jesus emerges out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and the voice of God says, “This is my beloved Son. I am pleased with him.” The third truth of baptism is revealed – God, the Holy Trinity, bestows a blessing on the person being baptized.

Admittedly, baptism is a bit mysterious. It should be, because baptism is one way we experience the wonder of the living God. Baptism is a sacred and holy act performed with the witness of the church. Through baptism, God works in people’s hearts and lives, to repent, live a new life, and be marked as a disciple.

[57] The most famous baptism after Jesus occurred on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:36-41, at the conclusion of Peter’s first sermon, we read about this amazing event. [57-59]

<sup>36</sup> [Peter concluded], “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

<sup>37</sup> When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

<sup>38</sup> Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

<sup>40</sup> With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup> Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Three thousand people were convicted by Peter’s words. They repented and believed, and were baptized. They submitted to Christ. Baptism begins with an understanding that we cannot save ourselves from sin. We need Jesus.

[60] Someone who has found Jesus finds a priceless treasure that pales in comparison to anything else this world can offer. Peter’s first sermon caused thousands of people to be “cut to the heart” and ask to be saved. People who desperately wanted to know Jesus and eternal life were willing to submit themselves to God Almighty. By baptism, they joined with the others who had made the same realization.

Baptism is intimately connected with joining the Body of Christ, the Church. The people who identify with the life, death and ministry of Jesus find life and community. They find God’s love. And so they join the household of faith, who together support each other in the promises they make at their baptism.

There is another aspect of baptism that we learn from our fellow Christians who practice “immersion” baptisms. This is based on Romans 6:3-4, which reads, [61] “...All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

[62] There is a powerful symbol of going into the water and coming out that represents death and resurrection. Baptism has always been and will always be a symbol of new life. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Anyone in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come.” Going under the water is like dying to yourself. Re-emerging is like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon. Faith in Jesus, expressed through baptism, tells others, we are different. We are new people.

[63] Baptism is also a mark of allegiance to Christ. The early Christians, when they were baptized, would proclaim, “Christ is Lord,” a dangerous thing to say in the first century. (1 Peter 3:15) When you make that claim in your life, you tend to draw attention, for good and bad. The early Christians, living under Roman authority, were viewed as revolutionaries. That didn’t go over too well. And sometimes, it doesn’t go over so well in our world. When you are baptized, you belong to Christ, which means obeying him and his word. This will give us a clean conscience, but it will cost us.

[64] So what does the physical act of baptism actually do? Baptism does not save us, in and of itself. The Bible is clear on that. It is not that sin is literally dirt flecks that need to be washed off; Jesus Christ saves us. (1 Peter 3:21) Baptism is the way we enter into his story, especially his death and resurrection, and ascension. It’s all about Jesus Christ.

[65] Our United Methodist understanding is that in baptism God adopts us. In Acts 16, we read two stories where entire families were baptized, Lydia’s and the jailer in Philippi. It is natural to assume that the children were also baptized with the adults. Today we baptize infants because we understand that God offers the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven to children as well as adults. A child could later decline that inheritance. But we cannot “rebaptize”, because God never breaks his promises. Instead, we can remember and reconfirm our relationship with God, which we will do today.

In the baptism liturgy, we answer the questions and make significant promises. We commit to rejecting sin and evil in the world. As an adult, this is my choice. In the case of a child, this is the life the sponsors want them to live into.

Baptism is both God’s promise and our choice. We make commitments to live for Christ, and when we fail (because we do), God is still there to rescue us.

[66] Today we have an opportunity to renew our baptismal vows. For our purposes today, it doesn't matter if you were baptized Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, or Lutheran...you get the idea. What matters is, you have identified yourself as a disciple of Christ.

I will add, if you have never been baptized, I invite you to come talk to me. I would love to teach a membership class here at Grace. If you decide to take that class, you can be baptized as you profess your faith and join this church. The opportunity is there for all. I encourage you to say the liturgy today and receive the sign of the cross, but know that we can do the full sacrament at a later date.

Please join me now in renewing our baptismal covenant.

*(Proceed with UMC Baptismal Covenant Renewal)*

#### Memory Verse

**Acts 2:38** - "Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

#### Reflection questions

1. Were you baptized? What do you remember/know about that day?
2. How is baptism an entry into the church family? In what other ways do people join a church family?
3. How have you expressed your desire to join God's family? Would you consider being baptized, becoming a professing member, or reaffirming your faith?
4. Whom can you invite to be a part of God's family and be baptized?