

Year C
Proper 27
Haggai 1:15b-2:9
Psalm 98
2Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17
Luke 20:27-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Even if you hadn't known it in advance, you've probably realized by now that today we're having a baptism—actually, two baptisms. In the Episcopal Church, baptism is one of two central sacraments of the seven that we recognize, and whenever we have a baptism, the entire service revolves around this ritual. This morning we're going to welcome Tommy and Bill Waddell into the Christian family, and I want to talk a bit about baptism—history and theology—and what it means for the way we live as Christians.

Some of you know what the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer says in defining the word sacrament, and some of you even had to memorize it: a sacrament is an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” So a sacrament is a way in which we can show physically something that is taking place spiritually. Whenever we baptize someone, and we sprinkle water over them, and anoint them with holy oil, we're performing physical actions to indicate that God is performing something spiritual and transformative. Sacraments are our way of calling people's attention to the fact that something holy is taking place—God is being especially active at that moment, if you will.

A sacrament is also a vehicle for transcendence. Because we are physical creatures, moving through the physical world, we need physical actions to call our attention to things that are *beyond* the physical world. These are transcendent experiences where we might come in contact with the Divine. Most people have experienced this in some way or another. Think of some things that have done that for you. Is it watching a breathtaking sunset? Is it listening to achingly beautiful music? Is it seeing your grandchild smile for the first time? Is it watching puppies play? There are experiences like this that point us to a reality beyond ourselves, experiences that can be hard to explain, when we are in touch

with the Divine in some way. Many things can do this, but sacraments have been shown to do this again and again, and so the Church offers these rituals as ways of being in touch with God in a particular way.

In the Episcopal Church we have the traditional seven sacraments: baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation, unction (sometimes called anointing), ordination, and marriage. The first two, baptism and Eucharist, are the ones described in the gospels, and the other five are those established by the early Church, and practiced for over two thousand years. Some Episcopalians will say that only baptism and Eucharist are sacraments, and the other five have merely “a sacramental nature.” This is one of those things that members of the Church often agree to disagree on. At any rate, this morning I’m going to talk a little more about baptism.

Most of the time when we baptize people we do it as a part of a regular Sunday service because it emphasizes to everyone the central part that baptism plays in being a Christian. It also reinforces the reality that the baptized person is being incorporated into the Body of Christ which is the Church. For us baptism is *not* only about a person’s personal acceptance of Jesus as their savior. It is the acceptance of a group responsibility to support one another in Christian living. Theologically, in being baptized, we die to sin, and are raised to new life in Christ. So the water that we use represents simultaneously being washed clean, and being drowned. Again, we die to sin, and are raised, washed, to new life in Christ.

In the ancient church, as the apostles spread the word about Jesus, adults who were in training to be baptized were called catechumens. Catechumens spent a year learning what they needed to know about the church, theology and history. They were allowed to worship in the first part of the service, but just before the Eucharist they had to leave; that mystery was only for the baptized. At the Easter vigil the catechumens were baptized, and they participated in the Eucharist for the first time. There are still Episcopal churches that maintain the tradition of a year-long catechumenate for adult converts, and the Roman Catholic and

Orthodox churches do, as well. But even in those churches, baptism is the beginning of something, not the end. It's the start of a person's relationship with Jesus, and with the Church.

Baptizing infants came about, in part, because we believe that baptism is about God's work in us, and not about anything that we've done to "deserve" God's acceptance. Baptism of infants is the ultimate expression of God's grace, in welcoming people into the Church that not only have done nothing to earn God's love, but don't even understand what is happening. In infant baptism we make this grace available to them, and then promise to help them grow in faith and understanding. This way, ideally, there is never a time when they are not a part of the church. Children grow up receiving the Eucharist at the altar rail, from the time they can reach their little hands out to it.

Like the Eucharist, the baptismal covenant, which we will be saying shortly, is also an ancient ritual. In her letters during her travels, the 4th century Christian pilgrim Egeria described seeing a very similar ritual to ours. And in the Episcopal Church we make them prayers and promises that everyone in the congregation says each time a new person is added to the Body of Christ. That way we remember what it is we promise to be as Christians. Very shortly we will support Tommy and Bill in saying this covenant. And when we say those words together remember not just to say them, but to pray them, as we have for thousands of years.

Amen

The Rev. Melanie K. Lewis
Rector, Christ Church Millwood