

SERMON 908

January 11, 2015

First Sunday after Epiphany

980th Week as Priest

807th Week at St Dunstan's

72nd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

REMEMBERING YOUR BAPTISM

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

If you're like me, you have absolutely no recollection of your own baptism. I was "christened" as they called it, in a Methodist Church in Bryan, Texas, in late 1952 or early 1953. I have no certificate, no photographs, no baby book, no evidence whatsoever to confirm that I was actually baptized into the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

That lack of sacred memory, that absence of any physical record, is probably the best reason to be baptized at a later time in your life—although in our highly-technological era, in a time of Facebook and iPhone cameras—that doesn't even apply any longer.

I mention the protestant prejudice against infant baptism both to consider their reasons and then to discharge them as unfounded.

First, there is no stricture of the Holy Scriptures that prevents infant baptism, and there is ample evidence that Saint Paul and others baptized entire households, and even thousands of people at a time. Surely that must have included men, women, boys, girls, slaves, and even little babies.

Second, there is every good reason to baptize everybody without reservation or hesitation. Anyone who comes to the Lord, seeking to be baptized, or for their children to be baptized, ought to be granted that grace. Who am I to refuse anyone the Sacrament of New Birth? And what am I saying as a priest of this One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church if I delay a person's Holy Baptism, or I turn them away, or I make it difficult for them to be made the newest member of the Household of God? Woe be unto me if I stand in the way of any person—man, woman, boy, girl, or baby—who is to be marked as Christ's own forever! And then third, and finally, if we wait to baptize someone until they "understand" Holy Baptism, we might never baptize anyone. Baptism is a Sacrament of the Church, an outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual grace. We don't "understand"

sacraments in a logical or empirical way, we do them, because our Lord commanded us to do them.

Now that that's out of the way, let's consider what to do about those of us who have no sacred memory or actual record of our own baptism ...

There are several opportunities each church year for all of us to remember our baptism in a real and present manner. At the Easter Vigil, there is a Renewal of Baptismal Vows. At every Holy Baptism, there is a Renewal of Baptismal Vows. And it is also customary, on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, when we recall the Baptism of Our Lord, to renew our own Baptismal Vows. Furthermore, when you enter the church, just as you come into the Narthex, there is a small bowl of holy water, or in other churches the baptismal font which contains blessed water, for you to dip your fingers and make the sign of the cross, or simply touch your forehead, to recall that you are a baptized Christian. It's a regular practice for me, and that probably has to do with the reassurance I need that it actually happened more than 60 years ago.

And while we're at it, let's address the amount of water being used in a baptism. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters maintain that full immersion is the only valid form of Holy Baptism, and that anything less is invalid. The origin of this belief is from the Anabaptists and other extreme

protestant sects from the 17th and 18th centuries. Some, like the Evangelical Brethren, were known as the “dunkers” for this very reason. This German church, by the way, was the tradition that Garrison Keillor of Prairie Home Companion grew up in.

I tend to think that our Anglican norm of a baptismal font located inside the church and used for sprinkling or pouring water on the person to be baptized probably came from the loss of a few poor souls who were immersed in an icy lake or pond in the north of England. My old friend Father Pete, the Catholic priest in Fayette all those years ago, said that he had been to the spot in the Jordan River where John baptized thousands—including our Lord Jesus Christ—and he said the water was about 18 inches deep there, impossible to immerse anybody in!

I have baptized old men on their death beds, and babies just a day old. I have baptized kids in fish ponds and swimming pools. I’ve immersed new Christians in the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Martin. And I’ve baptized hundreds of people of all ages in a baptismal font in an Episcopal parish church. I’ve baptized bankers, and doctors, and lawyers; professors and students; old and young, rich and poor, healthy and sick, devout and still seeking.

The water of baptism was never meant to keep people away from Christ. No, it has always intended to be an open invitation, a radical expression of hospitality, open arms and open hearts to receive anyone who desires to know Christ.

Jesus said in John's Gospel, "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

In John's Revelation, he says, "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

And more. He says, "Come. And let everyone who hears say, "Come." And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." The water of baptism is a gift, not a test. The water of baptism is a sign of God's grace, and it is for all of God's people.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, written 700 years before our Lord was baptized at the River Jordan, he said,

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts
For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
AMEN.

And now we will renewal our Baptismal Vows on page
292 of the Book of Common Prayer.