

How Many Baptisms?
Mark 1:4-11 / Acts 19:1-7
Colebrook Congregational Church
January 11, 2015

Do you remember Gallagher? That comedian who smashed watermelons with a big mallet? I told the chaplain where I went to college that he was the Gallagher of Baptisms. This is because he did not consider it a good baptism unless the first three pews got wet as well.

There is a Jewish purification ritual called Tvilah, where a person is ritually cleansed with water, in essentially a tub, called a mikveh. It was to restore a person to a state of ritual purity and allowed a person to participate in religious activities, and to ensure that the person does not transfer uncleanness to other people and their property. After the Babylonian Captivity, and those taken had returned to Israel, converts to Judaism had to undergo being immersed in the mikveh.

So, what John the Baptist was doing in the river, offering to baptize people for the forgiveness of sins, was not a strange sight.

The earliest Christians practiced baptism by a number of ways. Immersion, dunking the whole body under water; or by pouring water over the body; or by affusion, dripping water on the forehead; or by sprinkling water, but only for medical reasons. My favorite description of some of these methods was translated as “a thorough soaking.” Following the soaking, the person is welcomed into the community with a laying on of hands, and then they received instructions on being a Christian.

Starting about the time when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christian instruction was started before Baptism, and then, Baptism was only done once a year, on Easter morning, involving lots of additional rituals, used oil and myrrh instead of water, and was officiated over by a Bishop. When completed, they were led to the rest of the community to join them in the Easter celebrations.

In the early middle ages, there were less converts from paganism, so the ritual was simplified, done very quickly, and was not considered important.

Most people were baptized either as infants, or on their deathbed.

It wasn't until the twelfth century that there was an effort to define what the sacraments should be, and the dripping method we use today became the usual way to do so and both the East and West invoked the Trinity.

After centuries of almost but not quite uniformity, the Reformation saw Baptisms become more varied once again, but in a different way. Many Protestants kept the same ritual, but the Anabaptist strains, the Baptists, the Amish, Mennonites, the Disciples of Christ, and Pentecostal churches reject any baptism not done by them, and can only be done by believers who profess a proper statement of faith. Eastern Orthodox church accept other church's baptisms, as long as the words they used translate literally to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Jehovah's Witnesses do not recognize as valid other church's baptisms that happened after 1914. Some churches reject baptism all together, those that still exist are the Quakers, Unitarians, and Christian Scientists.

We Congregationalists are free to practice all the various methods of Baptisms, accepting the baptisms of other churches. I have heard the church in Nepaug happens to be next to a river, so they have been using that.

We can see the conflicts based on different views of baptism in today's selections. In the Gospel of Mark, we hear about John the Baptist, baptizing people for the forgiveness of sins, and Mark makes sure we know that John is not the Messiah, but is the one who points to the Messiah. And when Jesus is Baptized, there is a theophany, God expressing approval with the proceedings. And this marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Later, in Acts, Paul has a second encounter with someone claiming to be disciples of Jesus, but they had not received instructions or the Holy Spirit, and had been baptized in the tradition of John the Baptist.

Eventually, the followers of Jesus and the followers of John merge, but early on, there were issues between them, especially on baptisms. The earliest Christians had never been all on the same page.

The Baptism of John is seen as one of moral improvement, initiating a reform movement in a person, where they are anxiously reaching for something not yet attained. Meanwhile, the Baptism of Jesus is one of new life, counting on God's love & forgiveness, rejoicing in something already attained, though not yet fully explored or developed. The difference is one had things being centered on frantic self-directed efforts, and the other focuses on a God-given grace, it's the difference between a person trying desperately to be good; and a person admitting before God that they are flawed, and giving themselves to trusting in God, releasing their anxiety. It does not release people from moral responsibilities, it is a difference of framework and worldview, that allows people to carry their responsibilities with a buoyancy of spirit.

This difference reminded me of a co-worker at Barnes & Noble. We were both cashiers, and everything is collated and statistics are made that measures performances. This guy was hired, I trained him, as was my job, then he went around telling people he was going to beat all my statistics. Never said anything to me, and when I heard, I thought that was an odd goal to have. Well, he was driven, he pestered every customer trying to sell memberships, upsells, anything he could. It was later discovered that he was misleading customers and doing other shady things to cheat his way to better statistics, to make himself look better. I had a more relaxed attitude toward the statistics. It is not my calling to be there doing that job, so I do not feel the need to be as driven as that other guy was. I knew that my statistics, over time, would be fine; and I approached it as wanting to help the customer, help them save money, or find other things, and then just quickly get them on their way with as little fuss as possible. I felt a lot less anxious than he seemed, and it turned out that he never did beat my statistics.

Nobody is perfect. We are all flawed. But we can take comfort in our baptism in Jesus, that God's grace and love will always be there for us, relieving us of any anxiety and as we endeavor to be better people and to follow the teachings of Jesus.

Pastoral Prayer

We praise your abiding guidance, O God, for you sent us Jesus, our Teacher and Messiah, to model for us the way of love for the whole universe. We offer our prayers of thanks and love on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors, on behalf of your creation and our fellow creatures. God of mercy and healing, you who hears the cries of those in need, receive our petitions for help from your people, so that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage. [We pray for:]

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Messiah, Amen.