

In Jesus' Name

First United Methodist Church, Des Moines † January 8, 2012
Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, and Mark 1:4-11

Every year, on the first Sunday following the Epiphany, we read the story of Jesus' baptism from either Luke, Matthew, or, as is the case this year, Mark.

This reading, and those which come with it, offers us an annual opportunity to consider our own baptism.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the church. We enter the church through this sacrament. To remind ourselves of this, churches have historically placed the baptismal font in noticeable places. In older churches, one walks by the baptismal font as one enters the sanctuary. Here at First Church, we place the baptismal font in the chancel on the way to the altar for the same purpose.

When I say baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the church, I need to clarify *exactly* what I mean. I mean entry into the Body of Christ. It is through baptism that we become the visible expression of Jesus Christ to the world. We call this visible expression being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The reading today from Luke's Acts of the Apostles makes this clear. Paul finds some disciples who had not yet been baptized in Jesus' name. They had received John's baptism for the repentance of sin, but not the baptism by which they are incorporated into the Body of Christ – baptized in Jesus' name.

To become a part of the Body of Christ, one must be baptized, as Jesus commanded at the very end of Matthew's Gospel, "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

It should not surprise you that our ritual for the sacrament of baptism uses those very words. The pastor says the person's name followed by "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

But then, the pastor does one more thing.

After a person is baptized, the pastor places a hand on the newly baptized and says these words: "The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water *and the Spirit* you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ."

We know from this morning's Gospel reading, as well as the story from Acts, that God acts in baptism through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's active vital presence within and among us. Both the Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) and the Greek word for spirit (*pneuma*) can also be translated breath or wind.

The Old Testament reading for this morning thus also describes God's enlivening Spirit at work. When Genesis opens by saying "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered

the face of the deep, while a *wind* from God swept over the face of the waters,” the translators could also have said “while *the Spirit* of God swept across the waters.” The Spirit/Wind/Breath of God is the creating, enlivening, transforming activity of God in our midst.

The Spirit is God present among us as wind or breath. God’s spirit animates all creation for it is the Holy Breath that brings life. As we say in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...”

In baptism, God offers us a new life – a life on top of our biological life, which is also God’s gift . Remember the first thing a pastor says to the newly baptized: “The Holy Spirit work within you, that *being born* through water and the Spirit you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.” At our baptism, we are born into new life as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In a few moments, those of us who are baptized will have the opportunity to reaffirm what God has done in our lives through our baptism. We will give thanks for God’s making us disciples of Jesus Christ, and then, we will promise to continue to be open to the Spirit’s power, deepening our discipleship and thus becoming more fully alive.

If you look on the top of page 2 of the Reaffirmation liturgy, you’ll see specifically what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means “to confess Jesus Christ as our savior.” All that we say and all that we do should proclaim Jesus Christ. Everyone who sees or hears us ought to know whose disciple we are.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means “to put our whole trust in his grace.” I much prefer talking about trust in Christ to faith in Christ. Faith has an element of belief, or agreement with certain truths, which, while important, is not essential to being a disciple. What is essential as a disciple is to trust Christ with our lives – every bit of our lives.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means “to serve him as our Lord.” For years, we United Methodists have talked about ministry as volunteering, and, thanks to the musings of United Methodist pastor Michael Slaughter, I have concluded that was a fundamental mistake. Jesus said, “Follow me..” not “Give me a couple of hours a week.” Disciples are servants of Jesus Christ, seeking to serve Him in loving others as He loved us.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means to be “in union with the church that Christ has opened to all ages, nations, and races.” We cannot be a Christian alone. John Wesley said it best: “Christianity is a social religion, not a private religion.” Not only do we need each other, God has fused us to one another. If, in the arrogance of individualism, we break free from the union with Christ and one another which we begin at baptism, we cease to be a Christian any more. It really is that simple.

How can we promise to do these things? More importantly, how can we actually *do* all these things?

We can promise and we can do these things because God shares Himself with us in our baptism and in our living out of our baptism. The Holy Spirit – the Lord, the giver of life – infuses us with God’s love. From the resurrection, we know that God’s love is the most powerful force in the cosmos, for not even death can extinguish it.

When we are baptized in Jesus’ name, God breathes new life into us through the Spirit. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is therefore not so much our doing, as God’s doing.

We must do our best to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, but our success as disciples has very little to do with our efforts. The new life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, which we enter at our baptism and reaffirm this morning, is a gift to us by the Holy God who creates all, protects all, and sustains all, all the time.

“Remember that you are baptized, and rejoice!”

In the name of the One God, Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.