

“Immersed in the Faith”

Do any of you remember your baptism? I suppose some of you were baptized as babies or young children and may not remember a thing. But if you do, what is it that you remember? A lot of what you remembered and experienced is different from what I did.

First, I was baptized at age twelve. As a Southern Baptist, the practice is called believer's baptism. That is, I had to prove to the satisfaction of my pastor that I had sufficient understanding of the faith and the meaning of baptism to be admitted to be baptized. Thus, there were no infant baptisms. Second, my baptism was by full immersion. Full immersion is a tricky business, as my baptism proved. When the minister bent backwards into the water, my feet slipped out from under me and went up into the air. My brother loves to tell the story of my upper body disappearing and my bare feet flying up for all to see.

I do not blame the minister for my mishap. Nine years ago, I baptized six people in the Jordan River, and we had the same problem. Speaking of which, let me pass around a bottle of water from the Jordan. A memento of when I baptized Americans and Angolans in the Jordan on a chilly day in January.

Baptism is an important rite of the church. Whether you have been baptized or not, what does baptism mean to you? [listen for initiation, salvation, forgiveness, welcome, hope, love, communion, received, Holy Spirit, Jesus...]. As I was reading this week, I learned that in some evangelical traditions, baptism is a sign of stepping out of the world. Baptism is a denial of your former life and a denial of the world. I wondered about this, and I think I understand how that fits in with the way some religious people think.

The tradition in which I was raised viewed the world as a dangerous place full of temptations that would draw us away from God into sin. The world to them is evil. There is no hope for us except that Jesus will defend us at the last judgment. Our resistance to temptation could make all the difference between heaven and the fiery abyss. Fear was the great motivator.

Thus, dancing was forbidden because it might encourage lust. Drinking alcohol was banned because it could lead to any number of illicit behaviors. Smoking tobacco was disapproved because it was harmful to the body and addictive. (Although that did not stop the men of that church from smoking in the parking lot after the service.) In any case, the theological concept is that by stepping into the church, we are stepping out of the world and all its temptations.

However, when I stepped out of that baptismal pool, I did not feel separated or selected. What I felt was a glow of ethereal light surrounding me. Something had come into me. I could not have named it at the time, but in retrospect, I believe it was the Holy Spirit that revealed herself to me. It is like the feeling I experienced when I had Communion after abstaining for nearly ten

years. In that moment, it felt like the blood flowing through my veins had been transformed, or something had been added to my blood that changed it.

In both cases, it was not me leaving the world but something entering me that allowed me to be different in the world. I was not better, superior, or selected. Although I did feel that I was able to be better. I could see the world through a new set of lenses. Lenses that were not fearful, but grateful, hopeful, and caring. They allowed me to see the Christ in others. Oh, I was still myself. I still had my peccadillos, attachments, and hopes, but they were less dominant. Baptism was a doorway to something new that, if I dared, I could walk through.

What I find is I am still walking through that door. Its liminality seems infinite. I am ever leaving and ever entering. I suppose it will be that way for the rest of my life. We are always growing in God and never complete in Christ.

Even if we do not physically step into a baptismal pool or river, we are still stepping into something new. Our baptism calls us to acknowledge that we are stepping into a new life. We or our parents affirm that we renounce Satan, and we put our whole trust in Jesus Christ. We affirm the Triune God in the words of the Apostles' Creed. We commit to participating in worship, persevere in resisting evil, and proclaim the Good News of Christ, seek to serve all people, and strive for justice for every human being. That is a lot for an adult to commit to, much less a teenager or a baby.

Being a follower of Jesus does not mean withdrawing from the world. Rather, it means doing as Jesus did and going out into the world. We are to engage with the world as Jesus did. We are to help the needy, care for the sick, and the imprisoned. Share what we have because it is a gift from God. We are to care for the environment. God created it, we are not to ruin it. Each person is a creation of God, and we are to treat them like they are.

There is no doubt that this is not easy. That is why we have the Church and our fellow followers to be with us on this journey. After his baptism and sojourn in the wilderness, Jesus picked people to join him on the way. They were disciples and apostles, but they were also people with whom he could share the work of ministry. It would have been too hard to do alone. No matter how divine you think he was, he was fully human, and humans need community to be healthy in mind, spirit, and body.

As we remember Jesus' baptism this day, we can also remember our own baptism, or if we are not baptized, consider if we are called to baptism. It is a holy sacrament, much more than an initiation rite. It is a call to a new life in Christ and a new life in the world.