

“Commission without Omission”

How many of you can remember your baptism? How old were you when you were baptized and what do you remember about your baptism? I was baptized at age twelve. I had asked to be baptized before when my best friends were being baptized. I felt left out. I wanted to be part of the group. I asked my parents and they had me meet with our pastor. After our discussion he and my parents were clear that I was not ready. Several years later when there was not peer pressure involved, I once again met with my pastor. It was then that everyone agreed that I was ready for baptism. I was spiritually mature enough, and my desire for baptism did not have to do with what my friends were doing. Rather it had to do with my perceived call by the Holy Spirit to become a member of the church through baptism.

For those of us who were baptized as a youth or an adult there are significant memories of baptism. Can you imagine being baptized as Jesus was? It is not so much his age, as that he was baptized among a frenzy of baptisms. All of Judea had come out to hear John preach. His words were powerful and compelling. The Gospels report hundreds and hundreds of people of all stations in life coming to be baptized by John. There were common folk, merchants, tax collectors, prostitutes and even Roman soldiers coming to be baptized. In the midst of all of this Jesus shows up.

To most people I expect he looked like another Jew wanting to repent his sins. After all that is what John’s baptism was about—repentance. However, John had been prophesying that there was someone who would come after him but was before him. John said that he was not worthy even to untie this one’s sandals.

Then in the midst of the hoi polloi coming to the Jordan River Jesus walks in. John did not recognize him as his cousin, or as Jesus of Nazareth. John recognizes him as the Messiah. Simeon recognized the baby Jesus as the Messiah when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple for his dedication. Those who had eyes to see were able to recognize Jesus as someone who was different and indeed very special.

As I mentioned earlier John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. His baptism marked a cleansing of the past and being born to a new life free of sin and ready for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Besides repentance there are two other functions of baptism. One is initiation into the Church. That is often how infant baptism is perceived. Few people think that babies have sins for which they need to repent. But they can be initiated into the Church and their parents and their extended family take responsibility to raise the child as a Christian.

Another way to perceive baptism is as a commissioning. That seems to be what Jesus’ baptism was. We do not think he was repenting of sin, and there was no church into which he could be initiated. But when he comes up out of the water and sees the Spirit like a dove descend on him, and he hears the words “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” we know that something new is happening.

Whatever came before in Jesus’ life, whether he was a carpenter or student of a rabbi, he has now been commissioned to do some important work. That work will be borne out in his ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, and bringing good news to the poor and oppressed.

When we are baptized, whether as an infant, child, youth or adult, we too are being commissioned for new work. The church gives us five areas where we are to begin or continue our work as members of the Body of Christ.

1. Continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers
2. Persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord
3. Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ
4. Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself
5. Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being ¹

While we are not baptizing anyone here today, we can recommit ourselves to our baptismal vows. We can examine these vows and our lives and see where we are fulfilling our promises, where we are falling short, and where we want to put our energies. The promises we made at baptism were promises to God and to our community of faith. They are not five suggestions that we take up when they are convenient. Indeed, I think that one aspect of the promises is that they are often not convenient. We have made the promise and we do our best to live into them.

Many of you may recall that Lynn Anderson sang a country song that went "I Beg Your Pardon, I never promised you a rose garden."² So it is with being a Christian. Life is not easy and the Christian life may be harder still. But the Christian life promises peace of mind, contentment of heart, and the knowledge that the life given us by God was lived in service to God and to Jesus Christ who came to deliver us from the bondage of our sins.

Please take a copy of the Baptismal Covenant home with you and place it on your refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or some other place where you will see it often and can ponder it. Remind yourself that this is how you promised God you would live your life. Seek ways to live into this promise today and every day. It won't be easy. Take small steps that lead to bigger ones. I guarantee that you will find that life is more fulfilling and joyful when we live into these promises.

¹ The Book of Common Prayer p. 304-305

² "Rose Garden" written by Joe South ©1969