January 13, 2013 Hamilton Coe Throckmorton

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 The Federated Church, UCC

The Jordan River runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north down (and it is down) to the Dead Sea further to the south. Surprisingly small, it seems more like a meandering stream. When Federated’s pilgrims visited the Holy Land in November, Bill Mason, one of our group, wanted to be baptized in the Jordan. You may know that, in order to be a member of Federated, you have to have been baptized. So I kidded Bill that all his church votes over the years, and all the positions he had held here, didn’t really count because he had never been baptized!

Bill’s baptism, as it turned out, was one of the highlights of the trip for me. To celebrate that sacrament in the very place Jesus was baptized connected me to Jesus in a way few other spots there did. Our guide, Rimon, told us most people baptized in the Jordan were baptized at a different spot. We never went to that other place, but from a distance we could see the white robes that were rented at a considerably commercialized site for what looked to be an assembly line of baptisms.

For Bill’s baptism, we ended up in an out-of-the way spot on the river bank, a place untouched by tourism. Several fishing boats floated nearby, with their owners jawing about the day’s catch. And in this simple place, the Spirit’s rich presence was palpable in our midst. We prayed and sang and baptized, and joy flooded the place.

It goes without saying that we’re not all going to remember our baptisms as well as Bill will likely remember his. I was baptized as an infant by my grandfather, and, while I of course don’t remember it, I’m told I threw up on his robe! Some of you were baptized later in life—perhaps at twelve immersed in a Baptist church, or at twenty-five as a conversion to Christianity. In my last church, I baptized a woman in her late 80s, because to her life didn’t seem complete without it.

No matter how it happens, though, and no matter whether we remember it or not, baptism is the signal rite of initiation for Christians. Jesus did it (Lk. 3:21). And it’s something the church still does today. Some practice infant baptism; others practice believers’ baptism. But all have about them the same core: baptism signals the grace of God given for those who believe, that they might go forth to serve in Christ’s name.

Even with its prevalence, though, all churches struggle with one central issue: how much of what happens in baptism is God’s grace, and how much is our response? If baptism is, at its heart, an act of God’s self-giving, what, if anything, should churches require of those who are baptized?

I struggle with this issue, as do many clergy and lay leaders. What it comes down to is this: should a church baptize anyone who asks for it, without any conditions attached? Or should the church convey that something is also expected of those who are baptized?

On one side of the argument is this: who are we to impede the grace of God? The truest thing we can say about baptism is this: that, like any sacrament, it fundamentally celebrates the overflowing generosity of the Holy One. When we see and hear and touch that water, the first thing we should think and feel is that that water is liquid acceptance; it is fluid love. In baptism, we are united with Christ’s death and resurrection. A person figuratively dies to their old life and rises to a new one. It’s a kind of new birth, in other words, as we’re “born of water and Spirit” (Jn. 3:5). And it’s something only God can give.

At its heart, baptism was said by St. Augustine to be “a visible sign of an invisible grace.” Often babies are dressed in white baptismal gowns as a symbol of their new cleanliness, as they are forgiven of their sin and brought into the church. Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer of the sixteenth century, said “There is no greater comfort on earth than baptism.” Not just with baptism, but with anything of real importance in the church, we are always sent back to the initiating energy of God, who comes to us as giver and sustainer and forgiver. God is the One who adores everyone, and who are we to get in the way of the sacrament that celebrates that? So without any preconditions baptize anyone who asks, right?

As a matter of fact, though, Federated has a different take on the matter. And it has for many years, long pre-dating my arrival here. The church I served in Rhode Island, in fact, had a policy similar to Federated’s. In both churches, as well as in many others, we have deemed it appropriate to ask a commitment from adults who are being baptized and from the families of children who are being baptized.

And the question that lurks in the minds of many, and that was asked explicitly at a congregational conversation we had back in October, is: why? If grace is at the center of baptism, why is it legitimate to ask anything of the one being baptized? Shouldn’t we just celebrate the grace bestowed on the one baptized and ask nothing in return?

That’s an arguable position. But here’s why I don’t think it finally holds water (if you’ll forgive the very slight and pathetic pun). It’s because “baptism,” as the UCC *Book of Worship* says, “is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift” (p. 129). Or to put it another way: at its heart, baptism is very much like marriage. Which is to say that it thrives only as both parties make a full-scale commitment to each other.

If you’ve had a bad marriage, especially if you’ve been the one who’s worked at it while your partner didn’t, you’ll have some sense of what I mean. Imagine that you’ve given everything to your marriage and that your partner has done little. You do all the chores; you’re the one who asks how your partner’s day was and listen intently to the answer; you provide all the financial support of the household; you do all the childcare. You don’t need me to say what a fiasco such a marriage is likely to be.

For a marriage to really thrive, both partners have to invest in it and be fully involved. Mary could serve me hand and foot; she could wait upon me as though I ruled the universe, giving me cookies and ice cream and my slippers whenever I wanted them and asking nothing of me in return—all of which has a degree of appeal to it! As tempting as it sounds on one level, though, it could never really be a healthy marriage. Mary’s and my marriage could never really thrive if that’s the way I approached it. It’s in our mutual effort that the marriage thrives.

Back to baptism: as much as the core of life is the grace God gives to each of us, life with God is never just about what God does for us. It’s also about our willingness to give back to God. If the Trinity teaches us anything, it’s that relationship is at the heart of life. The life of faith is about the connection we have with God. It’s about the bond we share. And that connection happens as we give ourselves to each other.

The really astute biblical scholar Fred Craddock (*Luke*, p. 51) makes a telling observation about the baptism of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. Remember what the voice from heaven says to Jesus after he’s baptized? “You are my Child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:22); or “in you I take delight.” What’s not at all self-evident about those words is that they are quotations of two passages of scripture that Jesus and his community would have known well. The first part comes from the Psalms, and it’s from a psalm read at the coronation of a king: “God said to me, ‘You are my child; today I have begotten you’” (Ps. 2:7) goes the psalm. The first part, in other words, is about being crowned as special. And the second part of the words God speaks to Jesus is from the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights” (Is. 42:1). The second part is about being a servant of God.

So in this wonderful declaration God makes to Jesus at his baptism, we get words assuring us of Jesus’ special sovereignty—the “you are my child” part—and words reminding us that he’s also a servant of God—the “with you I am well pleased” part. All in that one brief sentence. Jesus is both chosen ruler, in other words, and servant with an ongoing mission. That’s what his baptism conveys: both ruler and servant.

All of which is to say that intrinsic to baptism is both gift and response, grace and expectation. Or to put it another way, baptism only comes alive and takes root as we commit ourselves to the God who has given us everything. Grace takes root as we give ourselves in return.

The only way to be a Christian is to practice the fundamentals of the faith. The same is true for Buddhism or Judaism or Islam or Hinduism. No one is born a Christian or a Buddhist. You become one of these by practicing the fundamentals of the faith. The only way a child baptized today will know of God’s grace and love is to be part of a community that teaches it and lives it out. It will not come on its own. We become Christians by singing and praying and hearing the stories of the faith, and by being in communities in which sick people are visited and outsiders are included and dying people are cared for and societal brokenness is tended to and everyone is extravagantly welcomed.

When I think about my own life, I realize I have found comfort in difficult times because I have seen and known people who have trusted in a power higher than themselves. I have learned what it means, and how crucial it is, to find room in the community for even the oddest of ducks, how much it matters that our hospitality be boundless. I have seen what a difference it makes for us to get outside of ourselves and gaze less at our own navels and find meaning in giving that stretches us and makes a difference in the world. I have been comforted when I have been sick, I have learned songs and hymns that have sustained me in my struggles, I have witnessed the amazing power of prayer to heal and unite and set new direction, I have been saved by love that keeps on giving.

And all of this I have learned in the church. This is where those graces have become palpable. This is where the God of Jesus Christ has become real. This is where those habits that make such a difference have taken root. Without that marriage between God and me—uneven as it is—I don’t know where I’d be, but I suspect I’d be lost and alone.

If baptism is solely about God’s grace, and has not the slightest thing to do with our response, then, as William Willimon once pithily put it, “we might as well ‘baptize’ people indiscriminately with a garden hose as they walk down the street” (from “Remember Who You Are: Baptism, A Model for Christian Life”). Why not just stroll into town after worship this morning, walk down Main St., and pour water on everyone we meet? If all baptism takes is a little water on the head, then everybody would be baptized and the job would be done. Everything that matters would have happened.

But we know even as we say it, don’t we, that something is missing in that picture, that that sort of baptism would be nothing but an empty shell. And what’s missing, of course, is that there’s no return by these doused people of the love God has shown them. All of which is to say: this is why the church asks a demonstration of commitment on the part of those being baptized and their families.

The heart of the matter is this: God has given us everything. In you, and you, and you, God has been well pleased, God has taken delight. May we return the favor, and give our all to God. For God has anointed us, as many of us were last week, “to bring good news to those who are poor; [God] has sent [us] to proclaim release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who are blind, to let those who are oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favor” (Lk. 4:18-19). In baptism, we have been mightily blessed. And in our baptisms, we are blessed to be a blessing. May it always be so.