

“A Change of Direction”

Date: Jan. 13, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Galatians 3:26-27; Luke 3:15-17,21-22 Occasion: Baptism of the Lord

Theme: Baptism; repentance; change; surrender, infant baptism

There is a ridiculous story about a priest who was about to baptize a young child. He approached the father of the child and said solemnly, “Baptism is a serious step. Are you prepared for it?”

“I think so,” the young father replied. “My wife has made appetizers and we have a caterer coming to provide plenty of cookies and cakes for all our guests.”

“I don’t mean that,” the priest replied. “I mean, are you prepared *spiritually*?”

“Oh, sure,” came the reply. “I’ve got a keg and a case of whiskey.”

I’m sure this is not what the priest had in mind when he asked the young man if he was spiritually prepared.

Baptism of the Lord Sunday is celebrated around the world today, as the local pastor of a congregation stands by the waters and says, “Remember your baptism, and be thankful.”

People regularly confuse this to mean, “Remember the events around your baptism...what it felt like, what you were wearing, which friends and family were there taking pictures of you.” But if that is what it means to remember your baptism, then why baptize infants, who can’t remember anything?

Let’s first look at Jesus’ baptism. Christians have long understood it to be a moment when water and the Holy Spirit revealed an invisible truth, as the heaven’s proclaimed, “This is my son, whom I dearly love. I find happiness in him.”

Those same words, or very similar words, are spoken over all who

are baptized into Christ: “You are a dearly loved child of God. God finds happiness in you.” This is a holy mystery; we call it a sacrament, where visible signs reveal invisible grace. Mystery is bigger than our understanding and therefore it is our responsibility to spend a lifetime learning what this holy mystery means for our daily living.

Martin Luther inherited and maintained the ancient tradition of baptizing infants. During the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptists were reformers who taught that only *believers baptism* was effective. They taught that repentance and confession of faith in Christ must precede baptism, and this cannot happen for infants.

The Anabaptists insisted that Christians be baptized as a profession of faith, even if they had been baptized as infants. Luther rejected this idea, and taught that there can be only one baptism. Luther argued, and John Wesley agreed with him, that baptism by water and the Spirit is an act of God’s grace upon the individual, regardless of that person’s ability to understand what’s happening at the time.

The congregation that baptizes infants, or people with severe mental disabilities for that matter, does so making the promise to raise that person into the faith into which they were baptized. Romans 6 highlights the death and resurrection that takes place in baptism, where our old ways are crucified with Christ, and we are raised to be a new creation.

In Galatians, Paul put it this way: “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.” (3:27) For Luther, and for Wesley, and for all who practice infant baptism, this is something that must be renewed daily. Remembering your baptism does not mean remembering what happened on that day. Rather it means, daily putting to death your old ways, and daily taking up your cross to follow Christ.

For too many Christians, baptism is a quaint little service we do for our children because we believe we're supposed to do it. Or maybe we've been influenced by our Catholic friends, and we want to have our babies baptized so they don't end up in purgatory or worse, go to hell. And so we just do it, maybe without really thinking about what it means.

And so, once a year, we come to this special service which is called Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Jesus didn't need to repent to be baptized, but his life certainly changed directions. He left the life of a carpenter and began his ministry to the world.

For many people the word repent means to feel sorry for what one has done. Sinners need to repent. But the word actually means to change direction, to turn away from what you've been doing and to turn in a new direction. And so Jesus gives us that example.

Baptism, whether as an infant, a youth, or an adult is still just the beginning of our spiritual journey. We are not completed Christians at our baptism, we are just beginning. For the rest of our lives we are daily dying to the old ways and daily "putting on Christ," as Paul says. A true story:

Rev. Sarah Jo Sarchet once pastored a Presbyterian church in Chicago. A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, he had a request for her.

"I'd like to be baptized," he said. "We were learning about Jesus' baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too."

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, she said, "Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?" His freckles

winked up at her and he replied, “No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God.”

She was touched by his understanding. “Well then,” she said, “How about this Sunday?” His smile turned to concern and he asked. “Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can’t I just have a friend baptize me in the river?” She asked where he came up with that idea. “Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn’t he?”

Caught off guard, she conceded, “You have a point. But if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?” Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf.

But before she placed her hand on the book, he responded, “I guess by my new way of living.” She nearly fell off the foot stool, and she left the Book of Order on the shelf. Cameron’s understanding was neither childish nor simple. It was profound. Baptism calls us to a new way of living, a change of direction.

My friends, we remember our baptism today. That does not mean we try to recall the actual event. It means we remember what it does for us: death to the old man and new life in Christ. Bishop William Willimon has written, “Baptism is a one-time event that takes a lifetime to finish.”

Martin Luther acknowledged that the battle with our “old ways” is lifelong, and it does not end simply because a person becomes a Christian. But even our greatest failures, even after we have been baptized, do not undo it or discredit it. The loss of belief or the greatest moral failure does not undo your baptism.

God has claimed you; you belong to Him. As long as there is water on earth, there is the opportunity to remember that you are baptized, that

there is a tangible reminder that God's love surrounds you, keeps you alive, and drowns and demolishes your sin. We may fall, but like a ball pushed under water, we rise in Christ. God is not finished with us. God will not let us go. God's love is persistent.

And so, remembering our baptism is an invitation to daily remember. When we wash our hands, when we wash our clothes, when we swim in the pool or the lake, when we float down the river: remember! When we walk in the rain, when we drink a glass of cool water, when we wash the car: remember. In Christ, our sin has been drowned and we rise to the surface in Christ, a new creation, turned in a new direction.

Too many Christians live their lives assuming God winks at their sin, assuming God doesn't care about what they do. They believe they can keep doing whatever they want and God will love them, no matter what. And that is true, but only partially true. Our baptism is an invitation, and a challenge – to change directions.

It is the invitation to let go of our ego, and allow the Spirit to direct our lives, to surrender to God's will, moment by moment. Paul says, "It is I and yet not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

My friends, I invite you to allow God to finish the good work that was begun in you at your baptism. Daily, choose to let go of your will and ask to do His. Your prayer may be as simple as "Thy will, not mine be done." Amen.