

Remember Your Baptism

Today is a day of celebration as we prepare to welcome Molly Elisabeth Conner as a newly baptized member of The Old Meeting House and the world-wide church. When I asked Molly why she would like to be baptized, she was able to state her reasons clearly, including her desire to give her life to God. Does she need to be baptized to do this? No. But is there something *sacred* that happens in the *sacrament* of baptism? I like to think so.

Baptism has had different meanings— or different aspects of baptism have been emphasized— across the history of the church. As we heard in our gospel reading, Jesus was baptized, by John the Baptist, in the waters of the Jordan River. John’s ministry centered around a baptism of repentance, with immersion in the water of the river symbolizing purification and forgiveness of sin. When Jesus comes to be baptized, John tells the crowd that, while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. And, as if to affirm John’s words, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus as he rises from the depths of the river, while a voice from heaven is heard saying, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

The Early Church retained the sense of baptism as a rite of purification. Baptism involved full immersion in water, and I have heard, although I haven’t fact-checked this, that those being baptized would be “dunked” three times, once each for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The third time they were held underwater just long enough for it to feel like a small death— a dying to an old way of life in preparation for new life in Christ. Baptism was compared with Jesus’ death and resurrection, as Christians symbolically died to their sins and then rose to share the new life brought by Christ’s rising from death. Baptism in the Early Church was also a mark of being adopted as God’s children— being named as God’s beloved, just as Jesus was— and so it became the formal rite of entry into the Christian church.

In the early days of the church, most of those being baptized were adults who were converting to Christianity. Many Christians in the early centuries of the church delayed their baptism because of the faulty idea that while baptism washed away all *previous* sin, any sins committed *after* baptism would not be forgiven. There were more than a few deathbed baptisms of those who had been afraid that they might misbehave after they were baptized, or of those who didn’t want to give up their vices.

However, there is evidence that infant baptism was widespread by the beginning of the third century, and this became the common practice of the church. Baptism was viewed as the rite of initiation into the community of the church, and so it was believed that infants born into the community should be welcomed through baptism. Baptism also conveyed God’s grace to the new child. But unfortunately, it was also believed that infants were born with the stain of original sin, and baptism was needed to wash this sin away. This led to the sad idea of “limbo,” a place

where babies who died unbaptized were sent because they couldn't enter heaven still stained by original sin.

I remember being told, in seminary, that any baptized Christian could baptize another in an emergency. In the Middle Ages, midwives were authorized by the church to perform a baptism if the child was unlikely to survive and there was no man nearby to do it. (!) This was perhaps the first instance, in the Roman church, of giving women the authority to perform a sacrament.

I performed my first baptism before I was ordained, while I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education unit at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. I was on call, on a Sunday evening, and was called in to meet with a family whose young adult son was dying from a gunshot accident. He had never been baptized and his mother requested that I baptize him. (Our CPE supervisor had told us that we were covered if we should encounter such a request.) Should I do it? The young man was comatose and certainly not able to express his wishes. But this was one of those times when the comfort of the family far outweighed any theological qualms I might have had.

And something wondrous happened during that baptism. The ICU nurses were remarkably helpful in finding me a vessel for water and clearing space around the hospital bed. When I was ready, I expected just the immediate family to come with me from the family consult room where we had been meeting. But the waiting room had filled with extended family, and they all followed me down the hall to the ICU. The staff didn't even blink, as we broke all the rules about the number of visitors permitted and crowded around the hospital bed where the young man lay.

I performed a simple baptism, and then began to say The Lord's Prayer. Until that point, the family had been silent. But slowly other voices joined mine, until we were all praying together. In the grace of sacrament and prayer, the dam of their grief broke and tears flowed. One by one, people came forward to say their goodbyes. I stood aside, holding them all in silent prayer. It was not what I would have wanted for my first baptism, but it showed me just how powerful the sacrament can be, and God was surely there.

In our time, explanations of the meaning of baptism tend to focus more on incorporation into Christian community and transformation of life through the Way of Christ. In the words of the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship*,

A person is incorporated into the universal church, the body of Christ, through the sacrament of baptism. The water, words, and actions of the sacrament are visible signs that convey the Christian's burial and resurrection with Jesus Christ. The invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the water and upon the candidates for baptism is an affirmation that it is God who takes the initiative in the sacrament. "Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift." It is "a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the church of every time and place."

What we will do when we participate in the sacrament of Molly's baptism is "holy holiness." I also hope that Molly will know, through what we do today, that she is God's beloved, and our beloved, too. There is a story—perhaps it's more of a legend— that the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, would slap himself on the forehead and say, "Martin, remember your baptism," whenever he felt troubled by something he had done, reminding himself of God's forgiveness and grace. God's love and grace reach out to us in baptism. We are named when we are baptized, because God's love for us is specific— God has called us each by name. So remember your baptism. Just as we affirm, today, that Molly is God's beloved, remember that you are, too!

Amen.

