

## “WELCOME TO THE BAPTISMAL CITY”

Practicing (for) the Kingdom: Baptism

*Matthew 3:13-17; Galatians 3:27-29*

I talked last Sunday about how strange  
the practices of Christian worship are  
when seen from our culture’s viewpoint.

Well, things keep getting *stranger*.

Today we talk about a practice whereby—  
depending which tradition you’re from—  
a grown man or woman, or young person,  
walks to the front of the assembly,  
is interrogated,  
then . . . fully clothed . . .  
either gets submerged in a tub, or other body of water,  
or has water dumped on the head . . .  
*or*, an innocent baby, who has *no idea* what’s about to happen,  
gets brought to the front in its parents arms,  
and the *parents* are interrogated,  
whereupon the baby is taken and dunked or poured upon,  
probably in what looks like a giant fancy bird-bath.  
And all the people gathered look like they are  
overjoyed and overwhelmed,  
as if the most wonderful and miraculous thing has happened.

That’s how James K. A. Smith, in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*,  
describes what baptism might look like,  
if observed by some anthropologist from another world,  
or a culture that had no Christian reference point. <sup>(182)</sup>  
Unless we spend hours *explaining* things,  
an outsider would have a hard time making sense of baptism.

But what kind of sense does it make to *us*,  
who’ve witnessed it dozens, maybe hundreds of times?  
How would you describe *your* baptism,  
if you’ve been baptized and can remember it?  
What is the meaning that you, *individually*, put into it?  
What is the meaning the *church* puts into it?

Today is Membership Sunday at Park View.

No one is being baptized today,  
but thirteen people who have *been* baptized  
are remembering their baptismal vows  
so it becomes an opportunity for the rest of us  
to remember ours, too.

So let’s *think* about this question: what does it all mean?

Our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*  
says that baptism is a sign . . . a sign of several things.  
A sign of our cleansing from sin.  
A sign of God’s gift of the Holy Spirit.  
And a sign of being incorporated into Christ’s body on earth,  
the church.

But you know, a sign is a more powerful thing  
than we sometimes *imagine*.  
*More* than just a casual symbol.  
A sign is a real and tangible action—by *God* and by *us*—  
that points us to an even bigger reality.  
Like the many signs that Jesus performed in his ministry—  
they did something in the immediate,  
and they pointed to something even greater.  
Same with baptism. It *does something* for us as a church.  
It forms us. It shapes us.  
It helps make us into a people.  
It helps constitute us as the body of Christ on earth.

Our confession says this, and I quote,  
“Believers are baptized into Christ and his body  
by the Spirit, water, and blood.”  
And, “Believers are [thus] incorporated into Christ’s body on earth,  
the church . . .  
Baptism by water is also a pledge to serve Christ  
and to minister as a member of his body.”

A church that regularly practices baptism,  
is shaping who they become.

Even though we hold no expectations that the ritual *itself*  
carries in it the power to transform us,  
we *do* affirm—or at least we *ought* to—  
that the congregation that baptizes and renews baptism  
is engaging in a highly formational practice.  
Because if we hold up a sign often enough, that points to some reality,  
we begin to identify ourselves with that reality,  
to live into that reality,  
to allow our thoughts and desires to be *shaped* by that reality.

The reality that baptism points to, can be described with various words.  
The body of Christ. The church. The people of God.  
I like a phrase that Smith used,  
although it wasn't his phrase:  
He called this reality that baptism points to,  
“the baptismal city.” (184)

Baptism is a rite of initiation into a people-hood.  
In the church, the communal practice of baptism,  
repeated many times over,  
forms a new society.

We tend to look at baptism with a “zoom lens”  
zeroed in on the individual being baptized,  
and what it does or doesn't do for that person.  
That may be an important perspective,  
but looking at it with the “wide-angle lens”  
we see what baptism means to the church,  
the priesthood of all believers.

Smith writes, drawing on the work of *another* scholar,  
and I quote, “Baptism signifies  
a radical reordering of the social world in Christ  
precisely *because* it signifies that the priesthood is open to all . . .  
all, regardless of birth or class,  
are called and equipped to take up [our] vocation  
[as] priests for the world.” (183)

But why talk about it as a “city,” as a baptismal city?  
Well, being “a people” and not a random collection of individuals,

implies there is some social structure at work.  
We don't just happen to be at the same place at the same time.  
We are a “polis” to use a word you all know  
(but may not *know* that you know).  
You've seen P-O-L-I-S at the end of words—  
like Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Metropolis.  
“Polis” literally means city.  
But it means *more* than the city as a place.  
It means also the body of city-zens (city-dwellers)  
citizens of a particular group of people  
who make decisions together.  
So the process whereby these citizens make collective decisions,  
is called, guess *what?*—“*POLI . . . TICS.*”  
That's right.  
A group of citizens who create social order,  
form a collective body that discerns and decides  
what to do to live well,  
what the good life looks like—is a political body,  
a “city” if you will.

So, in the best and fullest sense of the word,  
baptism is a political act.  
It is joining the “baptismal city.”  
We could call it “Baptismopolis.”  
And *that's* a word I made up myself . . .  
I know, because I Googled it and it didn't exist.  
But it will in a couple days . . .  
when this sermon gets posted online.  
My little contribution to the English language.

But back to the topic.  
In the city of Baptismopolis, the politics are altogether different.  
And I mean, *altogether* different.

This social body cuts across all the hierarchies we're used to  
in all the political worlds we live in.  
Here, in the baptismal city, the church, the body of Christ,  
we are all priests.  
In Christ, the priesthood is no longer reserved for the sons of Aaron.

Privilege by birthright is done away with in the baptismal city.

In baptism, we are, as the apostle Paul says, “clothed with Christ.”

That clothing covers up anything—*anything*—that would make any one person superior to another.

To quote Paul in Galatians 3, which was read to us,

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring,  
heirs according to the promise.”

Baptism forms us into a new kind of people, a new “polis”—

where every single citizen

is equally called and equally chosen

to be the bearer of God’s image to the world.

This baptismal city that we are welcomed into when we are baptized,

was founded, you might say,

by Jesus *himself* when *he* was baptized.

Though he didn’t *need* it, being Lord of all creation,

he *asked* to be baptized by John.

He *asked* to be identified in this way,

with his earthly people, his “*polis*.”

And when he did so, God said, “Yes, that’s my boy!

I’m proud of him!”

In those very words,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

That’s kind of the way baptism still is in the church.

*We* take the action, *God* says, “Yes.”

We commit. God affirms.

And we are welcomed into the baptismal city.

Let’s stand together and sing a great baptismal hymn,  
#443 in the hymnal.

This ties together themes of resurrection and new creation,  
and sharing an Easter life as members of Christ body.

“We know that Christ is raised” #443.

—Phil Kniss, February 6, 2011