

The River
Matthew 3: 13-17--I Corinthians 12:12-13
Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC
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In a story called "the River", Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor tells of the day that Bevel, a child of alcoholic and abusive parents, is taken to a baptizing by his sitter, Mrs. Connin.

"Have you ever been baptized?" the preacher asked. "What's that?" he murmured. "If I baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. and you'll go by the deep river of life. do; you want that?" "Yes," the child said, and thought, "I won't have to go back to the apartment then. I'll go on to the river." "You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count. . ." And without more warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down, and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism. Then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated. "You count now," the preacher said. "You didn't even count before." The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face. "Don't forget his mama," Mrs. Connin called. "She's sick" "Lord," said the preacher, "we pray for somebody in affliction who isn't here to testify." "Is your mother sick in the hospital?" he asked. "Is she in pain?" The child stared at him. "She hasn't got up yet," he said, in a high dazed voice. "She has a hangover." The air was so quiet he could hear the broken pieces of the sun knocking on the water.ⁱ

There is a river, full of little children and babysitters, holiness preachers and hung-over parents, where sinners become saints and where the no-account people count after all. Christian baptism began at the river. John, the Baptizer came storming out of the wilderness feeding on locusts and washing them down with wild honey, demanding repentance of everyone. Then comes Jesus to the river, seeking baptism. John hesitates, but Jesus insists, and into, under, muddy Jordan he goes, taking all God's people with him.

I think often about baptism these days, trying to decide what in the world it means to belong to a group which uses the adjective Baptist to describe its Christianity. Historian William Brackney identifies baptism as that most unifying distinctive of the people called Baptists. He cites one Anglican critic who in 1645 observed of the Dippers rampant in England: (Dipper was an early name for Baptist. In NC these days it means something quite different.) "They preach and print and practice their impieties openly. **they flock in great multitudes to their Jordans, and both**

Sexes enter into the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell containing . . . their erroneous tenets," Brackney concludes that more than any other characteristic of the Baptist tradition, believers' baptism by immersion was the essence of historic Baptist identity.ⁱⁱ Baptism is an event and a theology which unites us to each other, as well as to Christ and his church.

These days we, like others before us, use all kinds of qualifiers to describe what it means to be Baptist. American Baptist, Cooperative Baptist, Alliance Baptist, Southern Baptist, National Baptist, Conservative Baptist, Progressive Baptist, Liberal Baptist, woman Baptist, man Baptist, black Baptist, white Baptist, Latino Baptists, all of these or none of the above. Fragmentation is the order of the day.

Truth is, we are Baptists living in a time of permanent transition in American religion and being Baptist gone or going and not even an angel from heaven can bring them back. Congregations are aging, funds declining, and one in five Americans claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. Some speak of a post denominational, even post Christian society, with new challenges and opportunities the order of the day. In such moments of uncertainty and transition, how then shall we live? Perhaps, like Christians before us in similar circumstances, we return to those things which have been there from the beginning of the church: faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into his body, the church. When the old mechanisms and institutions won't hold, and new ones are a long time coming, we go back where we belong. . . to the river. At the river we remember our past to find hope for the future.

Four hundred years after those exiled Baptists began their new movement in Amsterdam, let us say again that Christian baptism is a radical event. It is not merely a command we fulfill, or a membership requirement we must endure to get into the church. It is an act we experience which transforms the experience itself. Baptism does not create salvation, it accompanies it. Baptism is not merely a symbol; rather it is a symbol, which means baptism is an act of faith, and a celebration of grace.

The question, "Does baptism save you?", once so important to American Protestants competing, seems less relevant as the church moves across the 21st century. A more appropriate question is, "Does Baptism mean anything at all?" For many modern's baptism is neither powerful nor significant, an anachronistic initiation ritual of a bygone era. To others, baptism is an antiseptic event, tacked on to worship, streamlined for the sake of convenience. Most churches do not gather at the river anymore. We have taken it inside and toned it down considerably. Some baptisms use minimal amounts of water. We Baptists dip the entire body into heated, fiberglass baptisteries full of fresh water, no muss, no fuss. In many churches, after the baptismal service, you can hear the strains of distant hair dryers making new converts presentable before their return to the worshiping congregation. I wish that sometimes we'd let them come on in and drip a little on the carpet, don't you?

If we are going to immerse people, perhaps we should return to the river, at least on occasion, with the congregation gathered all around, receiving new Christian brothers and sisters with open arms, drying them off and welcoming them home. I know there are problems of time and space and pollution. If we baptized folks in the Yadkin River, the way they used to, we'd have to give them a tetanus shot immediately or send them on to heaven that afternoon. I know its a problem. Even indoor baptism, particularly by immersion, is an event fraught with dignity and danger, and the possibility of unlimited logistical complications. We all have stories.

Years ago, I was interim pastor at the Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, where everything is done with dignity and order. A young man confessed faith in Christ and requested baptism. We talked beforehand of life and faith, death and hope. We even did a dry run at the baptism. But not until the moment he entered the water with me on a bright Sunday morning did I realize that Bob was over six feet tall and weighed more than 200 pounds--slightly larger than myself. I looked out at the congregation and saw my wife put her hand in her hands, and I knew I was in big trouble. Yet down he went, with the name of God spoken over him. And down I went, too, staggering under the weight, with water pouring into the hip boots I wore under my robe.

Somehow, we got back up, both grateful for grace and unexpected adrenalin, all to a congregation which broke into spontaneous applause in celebration, relief, and good humor.

Perhaps we should always applaud at baptism, or shout like our frontier ancestors, Do something a little frivolous. The angels do, Jesus said, rejoice over even one sinner who once lost is found again, at the river. Let us rejoice at this strange and wonderful sign which God has given us.

However we administer it, baptism should be a significant moment for participant and observer alike. And every time we do it, we should say again something of what baptism means to the people of God. We might remember, for example, that to be baptized is to put on Christ. As Paul writes, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:27) We not only believe in Jesus, but also identify with him and his way of living in the world.

In the early Christian centuries, converts were baptized naked. Did you know that? Now that would perk up a Sunday morning worship service! And they put on white robes when they came up out of the water. It was a sign that they had literally put on Christ like a new garment. We, like they, are the Christ-bearers of our world, carrying Christ with us out there where we belong.

We might also say that baptism is not merely a symbol of faith--it is an act of faith. Perhaps we might call it a faithful act. Faith and baptism are linked inseparably. All Christian communions affirm that unity. Faith keeps baptism from becoming a purely magic ritual while baptism keeps faith from deteriorating into a purely individualistic experience. Indeed, in another time of uncertainty in Christ's church, it was baptism to which the great reformer Martin Luther would cling. In baptism, he said, it was not simply that we have claimed Christ, but that Christ has claimed us, and will not let us go.

Most of all, perhaps, baptism is the symbol of liberation in Christ. It is the promise of freedom to all who believe. Nowhere is this more evident than in slavery time in the American South. White Christians frequently qualified the Gospel by insisting that baptism changed only the

slave's eternal status, not their early condition. But try as they might, they could not keep the liberating power of the Gospel from finding its way into the hearts and hopes of the African-Americans. So, in 1804, a Kentucky slave woman named Winnie was disciplined by the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church where she was a member for saying that "she once thought it her duty to serve her mistress and master, but since the Lord had converted her [since her baptism] she had never believed that any Christian [could keep] Negroes or slaves." And she got into more trouble for saying that "there were thousands of white people wallowing in hell for their treatment to Negroes--and she did not care if there was many more."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ That woman talked free, didn't she, even in slavery?

If we want to keep people in bondage, we should never tell them the story of Jesus, or baptize them into the radical faith of the gospel. To be baptized, therefore is to enter the river, the "glad river," through which all the saints have trod. It is to belong to a people. Those who are baptized into Christ are stuck with each other, Paul says, though he says it a little more eloquently than that. "For Christ is like a single body, with its many limbs and organs which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed, we were all brought into one body by baptism in the one spirit. Whether we are Jews or Greeks, whether slave or free, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink." (I Cor. 12: 12-13) We are a people of liberation, not bondage, captivated by a gospel which is often too radical for us.

This liberating gospel compels us to go out into the world, confronting issues of race and gender, worship and spirituality, witness and mission, sin and salvation--scary stuff. Let us remember that the word Baptist itself is merely an adjective. Baptism unites us with all Christians across the world and extends our calling to persons inside and outside the church. We are the community of the baptized, and it is in community that we continually return to the river, discovering again and again the meaning of this act of faith.

Our daughter, Stephanie, is a person with special needs, with learning and motor skill disabilities. Concepts do not come easily for her. Because of that I supposed that she might never

receive baptism since she cannot meet all the conceptual pre-requisites demanded by most Baptists. You see, she does not understand the substitutionary theory of the atonement the way the rest of us do. She will never fathom the historical critical method of biblical study or the plenary verbal theory of biblical inspiration. But on the third Sunday in December 1991, on the way home from church, Stephanie, age 16, announced to her mother and me, "I think its time for me to be baptized." We talked about it and she was resolved, so we went to see our pastor, the Reverend Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker, whom Stephanie loves dearly, and he was everything a pastor should be for such a moment. He did not speak of what she had to KNOW, but what she wished to BE. "If you receive baptism, Stephanie," he said, "you are saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus." Do you want that? She said yes, and we prayed together.

And on Christmas Eve in the year of our Lord, 1991, Stephanie Leonard entered the baptistery of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, and the same baptistery where her father had taken the spill years before. "Profess your faith, the pastor said. "Jesus is Lord," Stephanie replied. And under she went in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the presence of a congregation which had nurtured her to faith all her 16 years.

Those events taught me this: we are all special needs persons. In some of us it's just a bit more public than in others. If pressed, I must admit that I know more about sin and salvation, history and theology, doctrine and dogma, than my daughter ever will. But I am not certain that such knowledge makes me any closer to grace than she was on that Christmas Eve.

We are always going back there, to the river, aren't we? Rediscovering the implications and complications of divine grace. For the years ahead we need great patience with each other, and great humility in the face of the challenges ahead. But like the child in Flannery O'Conner's story, we can know that we count, after all, at the river. And for now, that will have to be good news enough, until that day when all God's people shall gather at the river, that flows by the throne of God.

i. Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 168.

ii. William H. Brackney, "'Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called. . .': Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity" in Perspectives in Churchmanship, edited by David M. Scholer, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 79-80.

iii. William Warren Sweet, ed., Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830 (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc, 1964), 329.