

Romans 6:1-11

John 3:1-21

July 26, 2015

The Sacrament of Baptism

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BORN FROM THE WATER AND THE SPIRIT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Sermon preparation is a constant activity. It includes selecting the scripture to preach on, translating, praying, studying, reading commentaries, taking the pulse of the congregation, paying attention to what's going on around us, listening to folks in the Wednesday morning Bible study, and seeking and hoping for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Because one thing is certain — Sunday morning is always coming!

This week some of my sermon preparation happened in a very unexpected way. After lunch on Thursday, I was walking my dogs in the back yard before I headed back to the church. A man came around the corner of our house, introduced himself, and asked about power-washing the house and the brick patio. We agreed on the job and a price. He got ready to do his work and I headed back to my work.

Thursday afternoon we had some heavy rain and strong winds. I wondered if he was still working, so I drove out to our neighborhood and, sure enough, he was hard at work. When I got home later in the afternoon, he was packing up his equipment because it was starting to thunder and lightning. He told me he knew I was a preacher. He told me he is an elder in his church. We stood in my driveway talking about church and sin and belief and faith and being a preacher and an elder. He began to talk about being “born again” and how your heart needs to be right with God. He told me how he preaches to his congregation about how important it is for your faith to be genuine and not just to go through the motions of ritual and tradition. I stood there in the rain and thought, “This guy is talking about John 3:1-21!”

Pollsters tell us that the fastest growing segment of the population when it comes to religious affiliation are the “nones.” That’s not N-U-N-S, but N-O-N-E-S. According to the Pew Research Center, between 2007 and 2014, the number of people identifying themselves as NONES (or unaffiliated) grew by 7%, from 16% to 23% of the U.S. population. While the NONES do include those who identify as atheists, agnostics, and people who say religion isn’t important, almost half of the NONES say religion is still important to them in some ways and many of them go to church sometimes.

We also hear people say, “Well, I’m spiritual but not religious.” Pollsters would probably put them in the NONES category. We may be quick to dismiss such a description as some kind of excuse for not going to church or more actively living out your faith. But for some people, being spiritual but not religious might be their way of

saying, “I’m seeking a relationship with God, but I don’t have much tolerance for what I see as empty rituals and church infighting.”

This story about Nicodemus the Pharisee coming in the dark to talk to Jesus got me thinking about what it means to be spiritual and religious. After having a good discussion with the Wednesday morning Bible study group and talking with the church elder in my driveway, I thought, “What if we read this story about Nicodemus by turning that phrase around? Instead of ‘spiritual but not religious,’ what if Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the dangers of being ‘religious but not spiritual’?”

No pun intended, but Nicodemus is something of a “shadowy” figure in John’s gospel. Here he is coming by night (does that mean he is in the dark about Jesus?) to talk with Jesus, but he doesn’t get what Jesus is talking about. Later in the gospel, Nicodemus speaks up in a meeting of the religious council and makes something of an attempt to remind his colleagues, who were plotting to arrest and kill Jesus, about their tradition of due process. Finally, at the end of the gospel, Nicodemus teams up with Joseph of Arimathea (who is identified as a secret disciple of Jesus) to bury Jesus’ body.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were lay leaders among the Jews who had taken on greater obligations for the observance, study, and teaching of God’s law. Nicodemus is identified as “a leader of the Jews,” which means he was a member of the religious council called the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus would have been considered a good, upright, righteous person of faith, the same as most Pharisees of his day.

But Jesus didn’t necessarily share that opinion of the Pharisees as a whole. Listen to some of his criticisms: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautifully, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kind of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (found in Matthew 23:13-28)

Those are harsh words, but think about them in light of what Jesus says to Nicodemus, who probably had no idea he was going to get into that kind of conversation with Jesus. Nicodemus pays Jesus a compliment — “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God.” But instead of simply saying, “Thanks, I appreciate that,” Jesus says something that makes Nicodemus (and maybe many of us) scratch his head: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Now I know that most of us have always heard that verse translated, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” It’s an ambiguous term — “born again/born from above” — that is so characteristic of John’s gospel. Nicodemus takes Jesus’ words literally — “How can anyone be born after

having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born [again]?" (I added that last word, but that's what Nicodemus is asking.)

But listen to Jesus' answer: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit." And where does the Spirit come from? From above, of course, from God. And so, Jesus also tells Nicodemus, "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I doubt Nicodemus would have said to Jesus, "You know, Rabbi, I am religious but not spiritual." However, that seems to be what Jesus is talking about. In light of what Jesus has to say about the scribes and Pharisees in other places in the gospels, we can hear him saying to Nicodemus, "The outside rituals and righteousness aren't worth anything if the inside hasn't been washed clean by the Spirit."

A few minutes ago, I put some water on Astrid's head and said, "Astrid Pepper Schwartz, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." I followed that up with these words, "Astrid Pepper Schwartz, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

The sacrament of baptism could be the perfect opportunity to be religious but not spiritual. What I mean is, baptism is more than "getting the baby done," or a socially accepted/expected ritual. The scriptures and confessions of our church make it abundantly clear that baptism is God's gift to God's people. Nothing magic happens when I put the water on a person's head — baby, young person, or adult. The water is a symbol of God's cleansing grace and mercy and Holy Spirit.

Then again, when I put the water on a person's head, it is not an empty ritual or tradition that has no meaning beyond the moment. Think about what we have sung this morning. Each verse of our first hymn began with "Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit." Here is what followed: "cleansed by the blood of Christ our King; heirs of salvation; trusting the promise; dead in the tomb with Christ our King; one with his rising; freed and forgiven; marked with the sign of Christ of Christ our King; born of the Spirit; we are God's children." Our pledge at the end of each stanza is our response to God's grace and our being born from the water and the Spirit: "faithfully, thankfully, joyfully God's praises we sing."

One of the confessions of faith of our church puts it this way: "We are baptized with water. And therefore we are baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually." (The Second Helvetic Confession, 1561, Chapter XX)

Another of our confessions of faith, a catechism, asks "What does it mean to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?" Listen for the answer in light of what Jesus said to Nicodemus: "It means to have the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood which he shed for us in his sacrifice on the cross, and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified as members of Christ, so that

we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way.” (The Heidelberg Catechism, 1562, Question 70)

When someone is baptized here, I ask all of you to remember with joy your own baptisms. That doesn't simply mean remembering the ritual and tradition of the baptism itself. It means remembering the claim God has put on our lives in baptism through the water and the Spirit. In baptism, we “enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.” (The Larger Catechism, Question 165)

Remember your own baptisms. Think about your own religion and spirituality. Consider what Jesus means when he says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” and “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and Spirit.

And listen to these words from our final hymn today:

“Wash, O God, your sons and daughters, newborn creatures of your womb. Number them among your people, raised like Christ from death and tomb. Weave them garments bright and sparkling; compass them with love and light. Fill, anoint them; send your Spirit, holy dove and heart's delight. To your name be glory, honor! With our lives we worship, praise! We your people stand before you, water-washed and Spirit-born. By your grace, our lives we offer. Recreate us; God, transform!”

Let us pray: (from my friend and colleague, Dr. Chris Denny, Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church, blog “Almost Daily Prayer - Passion for God”)

O God, in our baptism, you welcome us into the your family. Remind us that we are completely dependent upon You. Even our faith, which we sometimes claim as being from our own strength, is truly a gift of your Spirit. Still, as human beings, we sometimes find that our faith is weak. Renew your gift of faith within us. Amen.