

UNITED WITH CHRIST

ROMANS 6:1-11
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
FEBRUARY 11, 2018/TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

I want to begin by expressing my thanks to Thomas Coldwell for braving the wintry conditions to preach here last week on my quarterly Sunday away. It was not a great weekend for traveling and we were kind of texting back and forth, rehearsing backup plans if Thomas couldn't make it.

But I'm very glad that he did. Based on my own impressions of his sermon and the reports that I heard from others, it sounds like it was a really good Sunday.

I also want to draw attention to the Ash Wednesday service this week. We do this every year, with Christians around the world of all kinds of denominations, to mark the beginning of Lent.

It is a short service—maybe 30-40 minutes. It is a simple service—a few songs, prayers, Scripture, a brief devotional, and the imposition of ashes.

But it's a meaningful service to orient us as we enter the season of Lent. So if you've never come, I invite you to come this year.

Today we're going to return to the Faith Questions that have been occupying us since the New Year.

Next Sunday, we're going to press pause on this series until after the season of Lent and Easter Sunday. I'll be returning to the series by addressing four more questions in the month of April before I head out on sabbatical in May.

[road map slide]

The slide gives you a sense of where we've been and where we will yet go in April.

This Sunday's question is about baptism. Actually, the question came in the form of four questions.

Throughout this sermon series I've tried as much as possible to address the questions *asked*. This Sunday, I'm going to do this quite literally.

I'm going to break the sermon into four short parts, each addressing one of the four questions that comprised the broader question of how we should think about baptism.

1. Is baptism more than a one-time event?

I think we should begin by acknowledging that baptism is certainly *thought* of as a one-time event by many people, even if only implicitly.

In my experience, this is true both in the "high churches" that practice infant baptism and the "low churches" that practice believers' baptism.

There is a sense that I sometimes get in conversations with others that, "If I'm baptized, I'm good."

I'm sure many of us can think of people in our lives who show very little interest in faith in Christ or discipleship, but who take a kind of strange refuge in the fact that they were baptized once upon a time.

This mentality probably goes back at least to Augustine and the church in the fourth century. One of the big theological issues in a day where infant mortality was high was, "What about those who die before they are baptized? Are they saved or damned?"

The church's response was to begin the practice of baptizing infants—a practice which, obviously is still practiced by many Christian denominations today.

Now, infant baptism was not seen as enough in and of itself—then or today. All traditions that practice infant baptism also practice confirmation, where people are given the opportunity to learn about the faith and confirm it as their personal choice.

But I think that the move of the fourth century church to begin baptizing infants perhaps opened the door to thinking that the physical act of baptism *was* a one-time event that conferred a transfer of status before God.

I should add that the one time even isn't insignificant. It is important public statement of faith and incorporation into the church. It is symbolically powerful, no matter how it is practiced (immersion, sprinkling, pouring).

But the answer to the question is that, yes, baptism is *absolutely* more than a one time event. It was never intended to be seen as a quasi-superstitious act that saved in and of itself.

It was always meant to be part of a life oriented to Christ, to his kingdom, and as a part of his church. Which brings us to the second question.

2. How are baptism and a life long faith journey linked?

I spent some time this week looking at what our Mennonite Confession of Faith says about baptism. Here are a few lines from Article 11:

- [B]aptism... enables believers to **walk in newness of life**, to **live in community** with Christ and the church, **to offer Christ's healing and forgiveness** to those in need, to **witness boldly** to the good news of Christ, and to hope in the sharing of Christ's future glory.
- Baptism... is also a pledge to **serve** Christ and to **minister as a member of his body** according to the gifts given to each one.
- Baptism is done **in obedience to Jesus' command** and as a **public commitment** to identify with Jesus Christ, not only in his baptism by water, but in his life in the Spirit and in his death in suffering love.
- Those who accept baptism commit themselves to **follow Jesus** in **giving their lives for others, in loving their enemies, and in renouncing violence, even when it means their own suffering or death.**

It's interesting to pay attention to the verbs in these lines of our confession of faith. Baptism sets us off on a journey of walking, living, offering, witnessing, ministering, obeying, following, giving, loving, renouncing, serving, suffering, even dying.

These verbs are all entailed in our baptism. They are verbs that we spend a lifetime understanding and practicing.

And then, one more line from our COF:

- Baptism is for those who are of the age of accountability and who freely request baptism on the basis of their response to Jesus Christ in faith.

Ever since the sixteenth century, this has always been a central Anabaptist conviction. Baptism is to be freely chosen.

Now, even though this is our conviction about baptism, we recognize that other parts of the Christian tradition see things differently and that infant baptism plus confirmation can and does play an important part of many believers' lives.

Our own church's policy is that we do not require rebaptism for those who wish to become part of our community.

We do this to honour the ways in which God is and has always been at work in different ways in different communities, and to respect the ways in which we are part of families and communities that nurture faith in different ways.

But the key here is that baptism is meant to set us off in a life of active discipleship. There is a vital connection that we must always remember.

3. Why are we not talking more about baptism in the Mennonite Church?

Here I will have to slide more into speculation mode. What follows is my opinion, nothing more. You may well have other ideas and I would be glad to hear them.

My suspicion is that we're not talking more about baptism in the Mennonite Church has a lot to do with our cultural context. In a post-Christian culture where the church is

struggling to survive or is often seen as irrelevant, we don't want to make things too burdensome for people.

We know that even within the church many struggle with doubt and uncertainty and aren't sure if they want to commit. We see an exodus of young people. And so maybe we think, "Well, if we start pushing baptism, we'll just drive them away even quicker." We don't want to alienate anybody.

Also, I think that many of us can think of people who have been baptized yet want nothing to do with the church today; or, conversely, those who have never been baptized and yet their lives have a deep holiness and they contribute to the life of the church with enthusiasm.

Maybe we ask, "Does baptism even work? Is it even important?"

Again, these are purely speculations on my part. My sense is that we think baptism might be a hard sell in the present cultural climate, so we don't push it.

But I think we *should* be talking about it more. We should be teaching about it, and inviting people to consider it as the important part of the life of faith that it is. We should not shrink away from the fact that Jesus commanded it.

And we should celebrate it! Baptism is, after all, a joyful decision made in response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

4. Should we remember the covenant made at baptism more often?

The short answer is, "Yes. We absolutely should."

That word "covenant" is an important one. It brought to mind a recent conversation that I had with Claire and her friends at RJC.

They were in bible class at the time and her friend wanted to know what a covenant was and what an example of one was.

I talked about marriage—a binding commitment made before God and witnesses.

In the same way, I think, baptism is a covenant. We bind ourselves to, are united with Christ.

And just like marriage has ups and downs and moments where the covenant is tested and stressed and strained, just like there are better and worse moments in marriage, so, too, in the life of faith.

I know that in my own story, I got baptized at 16. I would love to say that my life from that point on was a steady upward trajectory of faithfulness, holiness, and joyful obedience. But it wasn't.

I drifted away here and there. I didn't always live like I should have. I had my doubts. I got bored with church.

But I could always look back on my baptism as a marker, of a commitment that I had made, as a promise that called me back over and over again, in a similar way to how my wedding vows call me back, over and over again to love and faithfulness in the context of marriage.

So I think baptism is somewhat analogous to a wedding day. It is the moment where we make a promise before God and others to follow, to commit to the road of discipleship, to dying to self and to sin, and to rising to new life. We don't and can't know what the future of faith will hold, just like we don't and can't know all of what "for better or worse" will ask of us in the context of marriage.

But we set out on the journey.

And just like marriage requires the active, ongoing participation of both partners to be what it was created to be, so the life of faith requires our ongoing investment, through our baptism and beyond.

Baptism is not magic. It's not the moment where we are "saved." It is an entry point, an orienting marker on a journey, a moment where we decide to bind ourselves to Christ and to his church.

And it is fundamentally about being united with Christ.

Romans 6 makes this plain. Paul is arguing against a kind of “cheap grace” that just takes refuge in the fact that God has done everything for us and we can live however we want.

In response, he appeals to their baptismal identity. How can you even think that way? You’ve been *baptized*. You have been buried with Christ in his death and raised to new life in his resurrection. Your old self has been crucified, the power of sin over you has been destroyed. You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is reminding the Christians in Rome of what they promised at their baptism, of the covenant they made, of *who they now are* because of this.

They have been united with Christ.

And we, like them, need to remind ourselves of this. I like how Richard Beck puts it:

We need to narrate this... over and over... You have been baptized into this covenantal community...

Cultivating this covenantal imagination--that in our baptism we have made promises to God and to each other--is the most vital and counter-cultural work now facing the church. This covenantal imagination is the antithesis of the consumeristic, therapeutic and individualistic identity held by most Americans, Christians included. And baptism, as our marital vows to God and the church, is the sacramental tool to combat it.¹

Like everything else in the life of faith, everything depends on what we invest in it.

There is nothing magic about immersing someone in water or pouring a bit of it over their head.

The physical act doesn't produce a life of faith, just like the physical act of exchanging rings doesn't produce a marriage of love and fidelity. Or, just like taking a bit of bread and juice, as we will do later in the service doesn't in and of itself make us more faithful disciples of Jesus.

¹ <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.ca/2018/01/my-advice-to-churches-part-2-baptism.html>

These are symbols. They are potent symbols, to be sure, and deeply meaningful. They direct our hearts and minds to transcendent realities. They ignite our wills and fire our imaginations.

But they require our ongoing and active participation to translate the symbol into the meaningful realities to which they point.

So, if you have been baptized, remember who you are. You are united with Christ, his dying and his rising to new life. Live into your baptism.

If you have not been baptized, will you consider it? Will you set out or continue on the journey of faith? Will you bind yourself to Christ in this important way?

May God guide each one of us as we reflect upon these matters.

Amen.

