

Baptism A 2020 SML MT 3:13-17

As we begin this year of 2020, let's make it a year asking God to increase our gift of faith, and perhaps to give us an opportunity to become a bit more intensely focused on various dimensions of our faith. Today's feast of the Baptism of Jesus is a great opportunity to reflect on the gift of the Sacrament of Baptism. So let's try to do that in the context of three questions:

First, what is Baptism?

Second, what does Baptism do?

And third, so what?

So first, what is Baptism? Baptism comes from the Greek word which means either to immerse or to plunge. Baptism is, of course, a sacrament. So what is a sacrament? You can't beat the Baltimore Catechism definition, which our St. Mary of the Lakes School and PREP students still memorize to this day. A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. A sacrament is a sign that points to something. It points to a reality beyond itself. It's not just a sign, but a special kind of sign. It is special in that Jesus is the one who works through the sign. So while you will see the priest baptizing, and although I am the one wearing the clothes and pouring the

water and saying the words, Jesus is the one who is actually baptizing. In persona Christi, in the person of Christ. Jesus is actually speaking through me. I don't say, "Jesus baptizes you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," but "I" – Jesus baptizing.

It's the same at the consecration. Dan Swift is not consecrating, but Jesus consecrating through me. I don't say, "This is Jesus' body," I say, "This is My Body." But it's not 'my' body. It's Jesus Body, Jesus speaking through me.

It's the same in confession. Dan Swift is not absolving. I don't say, "Jesus absolves you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," but "I absolve you." Jesus absolves you, speaking through me.

So question two: what does Baptism do? Well to answer that, it's worth asking what does water do? Water does many things, certainly, but it does two main things. Water destroys, water kills, and water gives life.

I need not belabor the first point. Those along the coast who lost everything after Sandy, those of us who helped in recovery efforts after the storm, can speak to water's ability to destroy.

Baptism destroys. It kills something. How? Look at a few scripture verses.

Romans 6:3, St. Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Baptism isn’t just a ritual where someone gets christened, Baptism is a means by which you and I actually get sacramentally connected to that cross. It is the means by which you and I die. 1 Peter 2:24: “We die to sin.” Paul goes on to say in Colossians 2, “You were buried with him in baptism.”

Baptism is most fully understood at the Easter Vigil when we baptize an adult. Before they are baptized, they stand next to the baptismal font. I ask them three questions, and with each question, they move deeper and deeper, figuratively speaking, into the font.

First question: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty Creator of heaven and earth? They say, “I do,” and the water is up to their calf.

Then another question: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord conceived of the Holy Spirit born of the Virgin Mary suffered, died was buried, rose from the dead, seated at the right hand of the Father? I do, and the water is up to their waist.

Third question: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Resurrection of the Body and life everlasting? I do, and the water is over their head.

Their sins were just buried. That's the grace. That's what happened. So the font is a tomb, if you will, a tomb for sins.

But it's not just a tomb, it's a womb, because the other thing that Baptism does is it gives life. No water, no life. Water is essential for life. St. Paul says to Titus, "When you and I were baptized, we were reborn." (3:15) We were given new life. This happened because the Holy Spirit was poured over us. That's not poetry, that's scripture, that's what really happened. The Holy Spirit began to dwell in you, and dwell in me when we were baptized. When we die to in, simultaneously with that death, we were reborn. That's why we say we were born again in the waters of that font. It means we became entirely new. This past year's parish T Shirt: "Made new!"

So now the ever present, and all important third question, so what?

Before answering that, let's just say this. The sacraments are not magic, which is to say that God always objectively does these things, He always kills sin and gives life, but you and I

can take it or leave it. That's really important. I can take His grace or I can leave His grace. Sacraments cannot have the intended effect in my life:

- if I don't cooperate,
- if I don't come to Him with faith,
- if I don't approach Him with expectation.

That happens all too often in our lives every time we come to the Eucharist, and we have zero expectation, perhaps like some of us who have come today. And it happens in Confirmation, in those 8th graders who could care less about Confirmation. It happens in Matrimony, and it happens in Holy Orders. The current scandal is a crystal clear example to this point.

Having said that what's the "so what?" Two things come to mind today in a special way. First Baptism means you and I have access to extraordinary power. It's called grace and that's great news. The Christian life presupposes I can change. I'm not stuck. I don't care what it is I walked in here struggling with today, whether it was:

- ✓ a habit,
- ✓ or a way of thinking,
- ✓ or a funk,

- ✓ or a fear
- ✓ or an anxiety,
- ✓ or whatever it might have been,

sacramental life means I can change. I can change, not mainly because of my effort, however important my effort is. I can change mainly because the One who rose from the dead, Jesus, lives in me and in you. And if I but surrender to Him, I can be different today, only if I want. I can take it or leave it.

Second thing: Baptism means you and I have an entirely new identity. Everybody in here hides their insecurity in different ways, but everybody in here is insecure, starting with me. We just mask it. Some of us forge an identity by:

- ✓ where we work,
- ✓ what we drive,
- ✓ what we wear,
- ✓ what we look like,
- ✓ whatever it might be.

We all try to create an identity for ourselves, but the great news of the Gospel is you don't have to. We already have one. Here is your identity: you are a Child of God. And to know that, not just to hear it up here, but to know it; to know it here, in the heart, changes everything.

God is not removed. He is not distant. He's giving me power, His grace to be great, He's reminding me of my identity as a Child of God, so I can be free, so I can live my life in peace.

So let's pray, that just as the Father's voice was heard all those years so long ago, so too, in this Church this morning, you and I will hear the Father's voice and by God's grace, we will, here and now, be changed.

Take it or leave it. I'll take it!