



May 2013

Volume 86 Number 5

Dear Friends,

Whether people are active church members, occasional attenders, or simply remember being brought up in the church, when they get married and have children, they often think about presenting the child to be baptized. My sense from decades of talking with couples is that they come with a wide variety of hopes and expectations. Mostly, though, they are clearer about their desire to have their child baptized than they are about what it will actually accomplish.

For some, especially those with the Roman tradition in their background, there is a sense, not always articulated, that if a person is not baptized, their standing with God is unclear, and their prospects for receiving God's blessings, especially after this life, are uncertain. Basically, the fear is that if I don't baptize my child s/he may wind up in hell. Even people who don't otherwise show any signs of believing in hell seem to have this fear planted somewhere deeply in their psyche.

A biblical case for this fear can certainly be assembled. It depends on a literal reading of a number of passages which I tend to read more metaphorically or symbolically. While I do not share that literal reading, I do not want to scorn it—we sometimes seek comfort in metaphor when the literal makes us uncomfortable or we don't know what to do with it.

So while I am not seeking to refute the fear-of-hell approach to baptism, I will offer another way of looking at it which I hope will make sense to modern readers.

**Original Sin. OK, I know what you're thinking...** One of the common images for baptism is that it offers a cleansing from sin, particularly from what we call "original sin." Despite its medieval sound, original sin is a useful concept for making sense of ourselves, our culture, and the world.

My working definition of original sin is that it is that element of human nature which, for whatever reason, prompts us to think, say, and do things which are unhealthy for ourselves and for others, and to do these things even though we might cognitively know that they are wrong. Original sin is that voice within us which is not the voice of God.

Original sin trumps reason and intellect. That knowledge that an action is wrong is an all too easily negotiated impediment if the action is something we really want to do. A strategy for dealing with

evil and temptation which rests primarily on reason, intellect, and their related tools may prove to be a disappointing defense. We want, and need, something stronger, better, and, frankly, more realistic.

**How can this baby be a sinner?** When we talk about baptism as a cleansing from sin, people who have not gone into the deeper level of this conversation look at a baby, conjure up their own image of sins, and see no connection. “How can you talk about that beautiful child being a sinner?” is a question which I often sense is unspoken, but is sometimes actually articulated by the braver of the parents and godparents with whom I speak.

And there is even some historical precedent for the question. I understand that in the earliest generations of the Church, baptism was offered to adults, not to children, and it was the culmination of a long—often over a year—process of preparation.

Preparing for baptism was more like preparing for a medical degree, or a law degree, or for ordination, or perhaps like attending a military service academy. We expect a course of preparation for entry into a new identity which sets one’s trajectory for the rest of one’s life to be extensive and rigorous. And so did the early Church.

**The Good News, and the Bad....**Part of that early understanding was that the actual act of baptism was a one-time, complete washing away of all guilt for any misdeeds prior. That was the good news—everything unclean about you—and any associated guilt—was washed away. The bad news, though, was that there would be no forgiveness for any subsequent malfeasance. If you were initiated into the new holy life of the baptized and you *still* sinned, it was prima facie evidence that you were damned from the beginning and nothing, not even the grace of God in baptism, could change or save you.<sup>1</sup> It did not require an advanced degree to figure out that baptism on one’s deathbed was the smart strategy, but it was equally clear that baptism was not intended to be last rites.

The tension between the ideal and the reality gave rise to the practice of confession and absolution. Baptism became a commitment to an ideal, to a way of life, and to an explicit relationship with God, and confession developed as a way to acknowledge our inevitable falling short of that ideal and a restoration back to the original vision and trajectory chosen in baptism. We are not perfect, but we affirm our belief that there is perfection which is not defined by us at our best.

**Spiritual Plumbing** Without confession we are left with the position that sin doesn’t really matter (“Hey, it’s no big deal, why are you so upset?” which, by extension, means I matter and you don’t) or that sin doesn’t even actually exist (“I can’t help it, I’m just made this way,” which tends to deny the essence of both will and responsibility.) And unless we identify sin as something undesirable, we simply keep on doing it, and our lives and our culture become more and more defined by what we do because we just like it.

And at some point we look around and wonder how it came to pass that we are living in something like a landfill of trash and garbage—mass violence, rampant debasing of human dignity, unrestricted greed—I am sure you can each add to this list. Think of confession and absolution as the ability to discharge waste, and then flush it away and get on with your life. Without confession, we basically

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<sup>1</sup> And before you dismiss that as primitive pre-modern thinking, consider the classes whom we view with similar judgment: persistent addicts, abusers in various categories, “hardened criminals,” those whom we categorize as psychopaths, and, until fairly recently, in some quarters entire races, national, or ethnic groups, and so on. Our culture tends to use judicial or psychological categories and vocabularies; in earlier times cultures drew on theological categories to explain and describe deeply troubling behavior.

walk around in the spiritual version of dirty diapers, which makes us cranky and unpleasant—for ourselves and everybody else.

We do not need to be baptized to participate in the discipline and benefits of confession. The baptism of John the Baptist seems to have been the ratification offered to people after they had confessed their sins (see Matthew 3:5-7). I doubt if I am alone in observing that the rite of baptism by itself does not destroy the influence of original sin. But baptism—especially when understood in a larger sense—does offer us a strategy for significantly reducing original sin’s toxicity.

**Religion and Magical Thinking** I have noticed that people who seem most likely to dismiss religion as irrelevant to their daily lives seem most disposed to view it as pre-modern magic. They don’t see the need to belong to a church, but they want what they imagine to be the magical benefits of baptism. For them the benefit seems to be in the water and the words, as if it were a vaccination or a treatment dependent on the taking of a single pill.

I certainly do not want to deny the possibility that God works in the actual liturgy of baptism in ways which I neither see nor understand. I baptize people because Jesus told us to, not because I decided it might be a good idea. I do not own baptism, I do not get to define or limit it, and I certainly do not get to say definitively what it is for. Baptism comes from and belongs to God.

And the danger of what I am saying is that it might seem to reduce baptism to some sort of self-help course. That view is, properly, a significant heresy—something plausible, maybe even attractive, but seriously wrong and significantly dangerous. We offer baptism, but we are passing on something given to us by God.

**What makes it work?** But I wonder if the gift of baptism is the larger process. What if the mechanics of baptism are only a part? Perhaps because I am not much of a magical thinker, and because Jesus gave such prominence to baptism, I find myself wondering if putting water on a person and saying the right words is the full extent of the gift. John the Baptist is fairly tough [“you brood of vipers...”] on people who just want to experience the rite but have no commitment to anything beyond the immediate actions. I am often so worried about being inhospitable (or, maybe, about being yelled at by an irate parent) that I wonder if I am sliding into affirming someone’s inner viper rather than offering transforming, and maybe demanding, baptism.

When I officiate at a wedding, the couple leaves the service married. But if they were to continue to live as though nothing had changed as a result of the vows, promises, and prayers of the liturgy, I would wonder if what they were seeking was not a wedding leading to married life, but just a festive setting for a festive party. The wedding makes them married, but whether that designation has any meaning depends on how they live after the liturgy.

So I wonder if what we offer as a means of addressing—and counteracting—the effects of original sin is not so much a supernatural event at the font as it is an introduction into a way of life which has its origins and its design in the mind of God. Perhaps we can think less of the magic of baptism without in any way diminishing its holiness. And it is that way of life, defined by the renunciations, affirmations, and vows we say aloud in the baptismal liturgy, which offers the hope of a life no longer defined and directed by whatever might make sense to me right now. Vows—whether in marriage, baptism, or in other areas—are voluntary restrictions of freedom for the sake of making possible a life we have chosen which we consider to be better. We give up the freedom to do whatever we might want in order to achieve what we have chosen. The result is not net loss, but net gain.

A couple is married when they walk down the aisle at the end of the service, but whether that marriage proves to be a blessing or a burden depends much on how they incorporate what has been said into what they do day in and day out. A person who is baptized is a Christian from that moment on, but whether that label has any substantial meaning may well depend on the extent to which they look to the promises they have made to be the core and fundamental principles guiding their life. Graduating from West Point may get you a commission, but to be an officer, you have to live the life.

We would have low expectations of a marriage in which one or both members of the couple decided to continue to live as if they were single. My sense is that the significant potential of baptism to address the toxic effects of human nature remains largely untapped if after the liturgy there is no visible change in how a family lives.

Few people get married just because everyone in their family did, and even fewer, I hope, to please their parents or grandparents. I think there is more integrity in not making a promise that you do not intend to keep than to make it as if it did not matter. The promises of baptism are countercultural, and if marriage “is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God” (BCP p. 423), perhaps the same might be said about baptism.

**A World View** Let’s look at the substance of the baptismal service, and for a moment forget that it is “religious.” (To call something “religious” seems to grant permission to affirm something in principle and then substantially ignore it in practice.) Let’s look at the baptismal service for what it offers: a wide-ranging description of the goals, practices, beliefs, and assumptions which form a systemic view of the world and of how a person can live in the world. It would be an interesting exercise for every parent in the first year of their child’s life to consider their core beliefs about good and evil, about the origin and nature of the created order, about the human character, about the limits of this life and whether there is anything more than what we see and experience—about all these things and then see how each element relates to the others. The baptismal liturgy offers a remarkably inclusive world view in an equally remarkably concise form. It distills the experience, the insights, of ages. It transcends any one language or culture. And it offers a way to go forward.

**Standing before the Bishop** A writer of the last century, I believe it was G. K. Chesterton, once remarked something to the effect that the problem is not that Christianity doesn’t work, but that it’s never been seriously tried. Later this month our Confirmation class will appear before the Bishop to reaffirm in their own voice the baptismal promises made on their behalf when they were children. Whether 8<sup>th</sup> grade is the best time to ask people to make this reaffirmation is an open question. But perhaps the best answer is that all of us should regularly reexamine the promises of baptism and compare those ideals to our actual performance. Where we see that we have diverged from the ideal, let us with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, not because we take perverse delight in groveling, but so that, having named what is amiss, and having sought God’s grace and consolation so we don’t become distorted by guilt or hardened by indifference, we might become less prone to repeat past dysfunctional behavior.

The holy power of baptism manifests itself in healed, restored, balanced, and strengthened lives lived in harmony with the will and even the glory of God. Churches were called into being by Jesus for the purpose of baptism (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19-20). “Teaching to obey” seems to be integrally linked to baptizing, and what we are to teach is not whatever we might think, but what Jesus has commanded.

Baptism is not an invitation to personal improvisation; it is, in fact, just the opposite. If improvising created good lives, we would have no need for baptism, teaching, or obedience.

So Jesus offers us baptism not as a restriction, but as a gift. And just as the vows of marriage are restrictions which we gladly undertake because of the life they promise and make possible, so the vows of baptism are also restrictions which we gladly undertake because of the life **they** promise and make possible. Like the life of a married person, the life of a baptized person should look different from what it was before, and different from the lives of people who have not made similar promises.

We are blessed at St. Elizabeth's with many baptisms. Let us celebrate them the way we celebrate a family wedding because they each represent a family making a good and healthy choice for themselves, and for our community and culture. And may we take advantage of being present at those services to reconsider and reaffirm our own baptismal promises, that the gifts they offer may be renewed and strengthened in our own lives.

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Rector