

THE PROPER WAY

A SERMON FOR THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD
SUNDAY, JANUARY 12, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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ISAIAH 42:1-9
MATTHEW 3:13-17

We're Presbyterians. We want to do things the proper way. Our mantra is that we do things decently and in order. In our zeal to do things in the proper way, we've been described as the Jesuits of the Protestant faith. I'll accept that as a compliment. We've also been described as bordering on the Pharisaical. That isn't a compliment.

But we want to do things right. And we want to have a scripture to back it up, and a citation from both the Book of Order and the Book of Confessions.

Here, in the account of the baptism of Jesus according to Matthew, we see this most Jewish of gospels, where everything is documented with an Old Testament prophecy, espousing our perspective. Jesus says, when John objects to baptizing Him, "Let us do so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

In other words, Jesus is telling John, "Let's do it the proper way."

Want to start an argument at a gathering of preachers from every church in any community? Ask them what the proper way to baptize someone is. I guarantee, if there are two present there will be three opinions.

The Bible is strangely silent on modes of baptism. We even have to draw the conclusion that infant baptism was practiced in the New Testament from the practice of household baptism. While we know of a certainty that infant baptism has been practiced in the church from the earliest of times, there is no single verse that proof texts the tradition.

Years ago in Mississippi, I supervised an intern who was serving a little church down the road. He was not from one of our denominational seminaries, but from a very conservative institution.

He was as close to a Biblical literalist as I've ever encountered in a Presbyterian church. He told me that he didn't think he could ever be ordained to the ministry, because he didn't believe in infant baptism, and would never be able to perform the act. I tried to explain, with arguments to tradition and to the household baptisms, but unless I could show him the verse that said, "And the apostle baptized the baby," he wasn't buying it. And no such verse exists.

I told him, finally, that he was right. That he needed either to change his career choice, or switch denominations. He did not return to seminary for his final year, instead enrolling at Ole Miss Law School. The last time I heard his name, he was running for statewide political office in the Magnolia State, so I guess he made the right choice, and God has blessed him in his chosen profession. I wonder if he still attends a Presbyterian church.

Now please understand that we Presbyterians don't just baptize infants. We baptize adults as well. Interestingly enough, the oldest infant I've ever baptized and the youngest adult were the same age: 8. And that 8 year old boy needed his parents to claim God's covenant promises in his behalf, and that 8 year old girl was ready to begin her life as a practicing professing Christian.

For those baptized in infancy, and for those who reach that age of discretion without being baptized, we have confirmation classes, to prepare them to confirm those promises and to affirm their faith, and I suspect we'll be having one of those during the Lenten season this year.

And that's what we consider the proper way.

But what about the act of baptism itself?

In the Baptist churches, and many others, baptism is by immersion, either in a baptistery built into the church building, or in a river, lake, creek, pond.

We Presbyterians, as well as Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists and Roman Catholics, among many, baptize by application of water, either "sprinkling" or "pouring" the water on the head of the person being baptized.

The truth is, we Presbyterians can baptize by either means, immersion or application. In over forty years in ministry, I've never baptized anyone by immersion who was joining the Presbyterian Church. I've had several who wanted to be immersed, but as we attempted to make arrangements, it always fell through. Either they were baptized by application, or they didn't join the church.

There is an old joke about baptism that goes like this: A Presbyterian minister and a Baptist preacher were discussing baptism.

The Presbyterian asked, "If I waded out in the water knee deep, is that enough for me to be baptized?"

"No," came the reply.

"How about hip deep?"

"Nope."

"Chin deep?"

"No, sir."

"All the way up to my eyebrows?"

"No indeed."

"Then I have to get the top of my head wet."

"That's right."

"Well then, we've had it right all the time. We only do the part that counts!"

When Jesus came to John on the banks of the River Jordan, was He baptized by immersion? Did John hold him under the water? Did he immerse him once, twice, three times, as some traditions call for, once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Spirit?

The earliest art from the walls of early churches shows John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ standing side by side in water up to about their waists, with John dipping the water out of the river onto Jesus' head. In some of the depictions, he's using a shell, like a clam shell, to dip the water.

Baptism itself is older than Christianity, obviously, for John was doing it before the ministry of Jesus began. In Judaism, it marked the entry of a proselyte into the covenant community. It also, as in John's case, represented a repentance of sin, a symbolic washing away of the sins of the past, and a turning to a new way of life.

Jesus wanted John to baptize him, because it was the proper way to do things. He needed no remission of sins, he had no sins of which to repent, he needed no symbolic cleansing, and he certainly did not need to be welcomed in to the covenant community.

Why then was Jesus baptized?

First, it gave the opportunity for God to reveal Himself, as the voice was heard and the dove descended.

Second, it marked the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, serving as an ordination.

Now in a couple of weeks, we will install four ruling elders who have previously been ordained to that office.

A couple of weeks ago, the Presbytery of Florida ordained Rachel Hood as a teaching elder.

When one is ordained, one's ministry in that order begins.

Baptism marked the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

I'm not so sure that baptism doesn't mark the beginning of our ministry as Christians, too. That ministry may be simply a ministry of presence. It certainly ministers to me when I see children who have been baptized in this church present on Sunday morning. It may also be a ministry of prayer. One of the youngest of our worshippers is now praying for the "creacher" at our church in his evening prayers.

For Martin Luther, knowing that he was baptized was all he needed to know. Was he baptized in the proper way? Can there be an improper baptism?

In baptism, we become a part of the Body of Christ in the world. In baptism, we receive a visible symbol of an invisible grace, the forgiveness of our sins.