

Third Sunday in Lent 2010 – Third in the sermon series on the sacraments: Baptism and Confirmation

A couple of weeks ago in the Anglican Formation Class, we were talking about the sacrament of baptism and several of us described ourselves as “indiscriminate baptizers.” By that we meant that we would welcome to the sacrament anyone who wanted to be baptized or who wanted their infant or child baptized.

In Scripture stories it seems as if John the Baptist, Philip, and others who baptized did so for anyone who came forward desirous of being baptized. There are stories of whole households being baptized because the head of the household came to believe in Jesus Christ. In the Book of Acts we read about Philip baptizing an Ethiopian after having had just one conversation with him about the meaning of a passage of Scripture from the Book of Isaiah. We read that: “As [Philip and the Ethiopian] were going along the road, they came to some water; and the [Ethiopian] said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the [Ethiopian] went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.”¹ It appears as if they were indiscriminate baptizers in the earliest days of the emerging faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

It didn’t take too long, however, for the rules to tighten up and for the pendulum to swing the other way. Once the Church started to be persecuted, the wisdom of the leaders suggested that a long period of time was necessary prior to baptism. This came to be called the catechumenate – a time for instruction in the faith and a deepening of commitment to Christ. At its peak, the catechumenate lasted about three years. Persons preparing for baptism would be allowed in the worship service for the Liturgy of the Word from the opening of the liturgy through the sermon, but would exit the gathering for further instruction prior to the Creed. One of the goals of this method was to discourage spies and infiltrators – people who were seeking to betray their neighbors to the authorities for persecution and death. The long catechumenate was a way of keeping out those whose only motivation was the destruction of the emerging Church. This was a time in the Church of *great* discrimination prior to baptism – very careful discernment and choicemaking – about who would be let into the body of the faithful to become members incorporate in the Body of Christ.

Today, the pendulum has swung back more to the stance of Scripture with some inclusion of the questions and vows from the early Church. Today, there are three things that must take place in order for the sacrament to be valid. First, the ‘right matter’ of the sacrament is blessed water.² The ‘right words’ are: “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”³ And the ‘right intention’ is the desire (on behalf of the one being baptized and/or his/her sponsors and parents) to be born again by water and the Spirit into new life in Christ.⁴ The grace received if all these conditions are

¹ See Acts 8:226-40 for the whole story.

² In the argument against infant baptism, the belief was that the ‘proper subject’ needed to be a penitent believer; it was thought that conversion needed to precede baptism.

³ These words may be spoken by any baptized Christian in an emergency, using any available water.

⁴ This is the ‘conversion experience’ for Anglicans/Episcopalians. It is a grace of the sacrament.

met is to be marked as Christ's own forever. It is intended by the Church that education in the faith will follow baptism.

In order to help be clear about the intention of the participants, the Church asks a series of questions. They are asked if they renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. They are asked if they renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. They are asked if they renounce all sinful desires that draw them from the love of God and desire to turn to Jesus Christ as their Savior, putting their whole trust in His grace and love.⁵ As one who follows the practice of Scripture, and baptizes anyone who asks, I do sometimes wonder whether the people pronouncing these vows know just how powerful these questions are...but I can never know the answer to that question. Only God truly knows, only God truly sees what lies in anyone's heart, and so I leave it to God.

The service continues with everyone present renewing his or her baptismal vows, so even if the depth of the promises being made was unclear at the first, there are opportunities all through our lives to reaffirm and renew our commitment to Christ and the Church as we grow and mature in the faith. The five key promises we make by virtue of our baptism may be stated in the affirmative as follows:

1. I will continue to learn more about the faith of the Church and be with other Christians. I will come to Holy Communion and I will remember to pray.
2. I will keep on resisting evil and when I fail and fall into sin, I will be sorry and get back on track trying to lead a good and holy life.
3. I will witness by the actions of my life and the words I say, to the truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
4. I will seek to serve the Living God found present through the Holy Spirit in all persons, loving others as I love myself.
5. I will strive for justice and peace in the world, and respect the dignity of every person.⁶

My oldest daughter was baptized as an infant, but my second two children weren't baptized until they were old enough to be confirmed. For most of the first centuries of the Church, baptism and confirmation occurred sequentially, one right after the other. Adult baptism was almost eliminated because everyone in Christendom had been baptized as an infant, usually in the first week of life. Confirmation took on a distinct place in the life of the Church as a reaffirmation at the age of maturity of the vows taken on ones behalf during baptism. The actual words said for confirmation are: "Strengthen, O Lord, your servant, with your Holy Spirit; empower him/her for your service; and sustain him/her all the days of his/her life. Amen"⁷ In the Episcopal Church, only bishops can confirm. There are those who suggest (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that this is simply to give the bishop something to do, some reason to visit the parishes regularly, or to make it a 'bigger deal' for the person being confirmed. There are even those who suggest that confirmation doesn't really rise to the level of a sacrament and that there is no precedent for it in Scripture. I'm inclined to agree with some of these thoughts.

⁵ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 302.

⁶ For exact wording, see p. 304 of The Book of Common Prayer.

⁷ The Book of Common Prayer, p. 418.

However, there are also those who say that the study and commitment required prior to confirmation replaces the long catechumenate that used to take place prior to baptism. I certainly remember the two years of classes that I was required to take prior to confirmation in the Presbyterian Church. I know that it was for me an act of deepening commitment to living an openly Christian, witnessing, serving, life in Christ. So, I think I could argue the case either for or against confirmation as a sacrament.

The bottom line is this: sacraments are given to us to confer grace and power to grow in faith, hope, and love. They are not magic. They require our cooperation and assent. My prayerful hope for us all is that we will be born anew by water and the Spirit, taking our baptismal vows seriously, being strengthened by confirmation if we so desire, and that our lives will radiate Christ's glory more and more as we fulfill our vows to God.

Amen.