

March 29, 2017

The National Presbyterian Church

The Apostles' Creed: Communion of Saints Baptism: Singled Out- Welcomed In

Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 16:9-15 1 Corinthians 10:1-5; Romans 6:1-4

David A. Renwick

In our sermons in the first part of this year we are thinking together about basic Christian faith, with the help of one of the most widely used summaries of the faith that we call *The Apostles' Creed* (see www.creeds.net).

This week we come to the phrase of the Creed in which we affirm that we believe in “the communion of saints” – a phrase which really can only be understood if it’s taken together with the previous phrases:

I believe in the Holy Ghost (Spirit), the Holy Catholic Church and (then) the communion of saints.

Together these are affirmations that when God is at work in our lives by his Spirit he not only wants to change our character individually – so we become like Christ; he not only want to empower us with gifts and talents – so that our lives can be effective in Christ’s service individually; but he wants to draw us together and *work within us and through us as a community* – the church.

Some people have the idea that the church is sort of “an optional extra” for Christians, that you can be a good or religious person by yourself without the need of a church. And to a certain extent that may be true. BUT at the same time, what’s equally true is – that you cannot be a Christian, in the sense of being a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, without the church: because the idea of the church is not our idea, but comes straight from Jesus himself.

One day when he was trying to gauge what his followers were thinking about him: he asked them (in Matthew 16)

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter,

and on this rock (Jesus says) *I will build my church*

Jesus wants to build a church!! The Holy Catholic Church! A community of followers all over the world: “catholic” with a small “c” – meaning universal; and “holy” and “saintly” – not in the sense of perfect this side of heaven, but in the sense that the church knows it belongs to God not to ourselves, and the members of the church are passionate about following Jesus – and

becoming the kind of people, the kind of saints, the kind of holy community – he wants us to besets

Some years ago, Bill Gothard ran some very popular seminars on the Christian life, and participants often had a button or badge with these letters: P-B-P-G-I-N-F-W-M-Y, which stood for: “Please Be Patient, God Is Not Finished With Me Yet!!”

This side of heaven, the church will always be imperfect, less than visibly saintly or holy, a work in progress. But what we’re saying when we say that we believe in the Holy Catholic Church” and the “communion of saints” is that we not only will choose to live our Christian life in community with others – we won’t be loners; but we will do everything we can to help fulfil Jesus’ mission to build His church, to let the Holy Spirit use even us to build His church, to make our community life, our communion with each other, as powerful and effective for Christ, and as Christ-like, as it can possibly be!

We all know that there are some communities -- Sports Teams –basketball, soccer, football; teams in corporations and businesses; teams of actors and actresses on the stage; teams of church people – who never reach their potential. Their people are technically on the same team, but they never play or work together as a community. They may even have their fair share of prima donnas or superstars but they never thrive together as they could!

But then too, we know of other groups and teams that may have no superstars at all, but who have a bond with each other – a common spirit so that they play and work together like magic.

That’s the kind of community – or “communion” that Christ wants to build with you and me in his church. And when the world sees this – this kind of “holy communion of imperfect saints” – they’ll stop in their tracks and ask:

“What’s going on there?” A loving, serving, sacrificing spirit-filled community is in and of itself “evangelism,” good news: a more powerful witness to the living Christ than the witness of any words or arguments can ever be!!

There’s a great story that goes back quite a few years about Jimmy Durante

A popular entertainer in the 1920's through the 1960's. Apparently, he was asked soon after World War II ended to speak to a group of veterans, and he was very busy at the time. He said, yes, he could do it, but he really could only be on stage for about five minutes and then he had to head off to another engagement.

The organizer was delighted that he said yes and he said, “I’ll take the five minutes.”

So, Jimmy Durante turned up, he appeared, he went on the stage, he performed for five minutes and then ten minutes, and then twenty minutes and then thirty minutes. And the applause was raucous.

And finally when he went off-stage he was asked, “Thank you, thank you. You stayed way longer than you said. Why did you stay so long? Was it just the applause?”

He said, “Well, the applause, yes. But there was some applause in particular that kept me going. Come and have a look at this.”

And the director of the show peered around the curtain where they could see the crowd, and there in the front row, there were a couple of soldiers. Each of them had lost an arm. And together they were using their only good arm to clap with each other. IMPERFECT, BUT PERFECT! PRICELESS! A holy moment. Jimmy Durante continued: “Every time I looked at that, I couldn’t quit. It just grabbed me, it gripped me when I saw what they were doing together.”

That’s what Jesus is passionate to do with our lives: to change us from being merely individuals who love and **serve him into a community or communion of saints: imperfect people in whose lives together God is at work!** People who are passionate about loving and serving him effectively together.

OF COURSE, when it comes to building an effective community, every team or group of people have rituals and practices, traditions and tools that mark them out from others, and bind them together and make them effective. In our nation, for example,

- we have a common document called the constitution that marks us out and binds us together
- and we celebrate festivals and holidays that only our nation celebrates: Presidents Day, July 4th, Thanksgiving, and so on. And these mark us out and bind us together.
- And more than that, we also have common songs we sing as Americans that mark us out and bind us together: our national anthem or America the Beautiful.
- And a ritual, the pledge of allegiance that functions in the same way (in addition to numerous rituals, often linked to sports – opening day of baseball, Super Bowl Sunday, etc.)

And in the Church, it’s the same thing.

- We have a common document – the Bible
- We set aside a common day – Sunday
- We celebrate common festivals – Christmas and Easter
- We have common songs and prayers

And – in the case of almost every church (with exceptions, like the Quakers) we share in at least two common activities, rituals, that we call sacraments or ordinances – that do the same thing.

- One is the LORD’S SUPPER – or Holy Communion (which we will both celebrate and talk about next Sunday).
- The other is BAPTISM.

And this morning I want to share just a few thoughts about baptism: about why we make it our practice. The first thought is very simple and has to do with the rationale for baptism (why we do it at all).

We baptize first: as an act of obedience to Jesus!

In the last verse of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus gives this command to his followers:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

This is a command, not an option. Jesus wants it! We do it! So baptism is first of all an act of obedience to Jesus.

But we baptize second: because we believe that Baptism is also a gift of God that helps us grow into the kind of community or “communion” that God wants us to be.

We call baptism a “means of grace.” That is, a channel through which God is at work in our lives – and not only in our lives, but in the lives of our children, nourishing and encouraging and strengthening our faith.

1. Baptism: Is Something we do to Affirm our Faith Publicly

For some Christians, this strength comes when we understand baptism in terms of our own faith: as a challenge from God made known in Jesus, as an opportunity to bear public witness to our own faith:

Maybe our Christian lives have been pretty much personal and private and we are beginning to have a sense that we need to come out in public and let others know what we believe and where we stand, and that we need to do this in joining a specific church through public profession of faith and in baptism.

At first, of course, this may not feel like a gift of God at all – “going public” may be the last thing we want to do; it may make us feel very uncomfortable or scared. In some countries, it can be downright dangerous.

But once we do it, even grudgingly, or slowly, so often there’s a sense of relief and energy and gratitude and belonging: like taking the step of becoming a citizen, or beginning a new career, or joining the military: “*we’ve done it! we’ve signed up! we’ve made the decision! at last, we’re in! we’re all in!*” And it may be that Jesus is nudging some of us here to take that step in some way – perhaps through baptism.

So baptism can be seen as a gift of God, that God uses 1st of all to point us to our own faith, challenging us to have the courage of our convictions and to bring our Christian commitment out into the open.

2. Baptism: Is a Sign of something God does for us.

But not only that – but perhaps even more important – **baptism can also be seen** not just as something we do for God, but **as something God does to us and for us**; as a gift of God pointing us not to ourselves, but back towards God, reminding us and assuring us of God’s love and faithfulness, first of all in welcoming us onto his team, and initiating us into his family.

2a. You’re on My Team, in my Family”

One of the great cries of modern society with broken and separated families and communities is the cry of loneliness and isolation, and with it -- the “need to belong.”

One way to think of baptism is to see it as God’s physical touch or mark, in which God is speaking silently -- promising to each of us, “*You belong to me. You’re in! You’re on my team!*”

If you go back to the Old Testament – long before the time of Jesus and to God’s ancient covenant community, Israel, the sign of belonging in the community was circumcision. And while it was clearly only for the males of the community it was, nevertheless, a sign from God that God was faithful and gracious both to men and women as well as to the children of believers; God’s statement that they were members of his covenant community: inside the community from birth, long

before they were old enough to understand or affirm “their own faith” for themselves.

So that in ancient Israel, circumcision was God’s gift and sign indicating that God wanted you inside the community no matter what age or sex you were – until you chose to be outside: not the other way around.

And this is what we see -- in our passage in Acts 16, with respect to baptism, too, which is the Christian equivalent of circumcision.

In the story, -- a wealthy business woman named Lydia, is baptized because of her faith. Immediately when she comes to believe she’s baptized. And this act of baptism is both a bold act of public witness to her own faith, and an amazing affirmation from God given to Lydia of God’s love and faithfulness to her! – she’s a Gentile and not a Jew; (and important in those days) she’s a woman not a man: and in baptism God is saying to her, “You belong to my family! You’re IN, not out!”

But here’s what’s even more amazing and gracious: she’s not the only one baptized that day. There are others there too – in fact, all her household are baptized as well, whether they had faith or not. The whole household would have included servants and children – and all were assured that they were in God’s family too!

Listen again:

¹⁴*A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to the message of Jesus; she was from the city of Thyatira, and a dealer in purple cloth. (high end fabric).*

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

¹⁵*and **when she and her household were baptized**, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.*

She and her household were baptized –whether or not they believed as she did! God welcomed all of them – because of her faith and influence.

- So Baptism is Gift of God, a visible sign given to us by God, pointing us to and assuring us of God’s love and faithfulness in welcoming and initiating us into his family and onto the team: “You’re in!” says God in baptism – you have my word, my mark!”

2b “My Blood was Shed for YOU!”

But not only is Baptism God’s word and mark, his promise, assuring us that that we’re “IN.” But more particularly, it’s his assurance that that when Jesus died, and his blood was shed long ago so that sins could be forgiven –that he had you and me in mind! He did it for US!

Or let me put it like this: Jesus died a long time ago: how do I know that his death and his forgiveness are for insignificant me today?

Well, of course, if we are old enough, this is simply a matter of faith:

We simply believe this, and trust this, by faith! But in baptism, God goes a step further and speaks through the sacrament to give assurance to every single person baptized, as if to spell it out:

- Just as the water of baptism touches our lives,
- just as assuredly, the blood of Christ was shed for us!

Of course, one of the huge debates about baptism over the years in the church has to do with the method of baptism and the amount of water used: *Do you need to be immersed? Or is sprinkling enough?*

Well Presbyterians can actually have it both ways. we generally sprinkle – but if asked, we'll immerse as well. So we're *wishy washy* (so to speak) on the amount of water. To us it really doesn't matter. BUT, what does matter to us is that the significance of the water – much or little – is not lost!

That is, what we believe is that as the water of baptism really touches our flesh today, whether in sprinkling or immersion, it points us to the real blood of Christ shed for the forgiveness of sins, and in the act of baptism, God is speaking to us, touching us without words, taking us back to the moment of Jesus death, as if we were there at the cross, and giving us the promised assurance, that his the blood of Christ, his grace and pardon, truly touch us too!

“Long before you were even born,” says God through the touch of water, “I not only welcomed you “in,” but I loved you and your children to the point of death. I died in your place. My blood was shed for YOU and touches and saves you even now, just as assuredly as the water touches you now. You're covered! Your sins are forgiven! You're in, You're on my team! In my family.

And when we – as those baptized – all know this, and remember this

- When we all remember that every single one of us wears the mark of Christ, the invisible uniform of Christ, in baptism
- When we all remember that imperfect and less than holy, as we are, every one of us has been marked out as God's own
- When we all know that our faith, though personal, must always become public
- And when we keep on being drawn back at every baptism in the church to God's love and faithfulness on our behalf shown on the cross, and sense his assurance that he has given us a place of welcome and belonging in his house, on his team – as if the touched of water was absolutely also the touch of God's promises and presence –

Then surely there is a chance, a fighting chance, not a guarantee (baptism is not a lucky charm), that this same God will use his power to build us into his team, to do his work on earth together – as the Church.

I pray so!

I believe in Jesus' passion, through the holy ghost to create
His church – both holy and catholic, stretched out across the world
As a life-filled, communion of far from perfect saints.

Don't you want to be on the team? I do! Wear the mark humbly, but confidently!

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800