

A SYMPHONY OF MEANING¹
Ephesians 4: 4-6
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
April 5, 2009

Our whole service today is a testimony to faith that God acts in common things such as bread and wine and water. Our normal tradition is to have baptism on Palm Sunday, and this year Palm Sunday coincides with the first Sunday of the month, which is our traditional time to observe the Lord's Supper. So this meditation will necessarily be short, and to the point.

Any great symbol has a symphony of meaning, and baptism is no exception. Today, I want to identify some of those meanings that are dear to us all.

I

First, baptism is a sign of following Jesus. It testifies to the belief that the Christian faith is less an embrace of a set of doctrines than it is about setting out on a journey. Over and over again, when Jesus was calling his disciples, he said "Follow me." So we are told that they dropped what they were doing, left their families, and followed him.

When we ask each candidate for baptism: "Do you accept Christ as Lord, and do you intend to follow the Way of Christ?" it means that they are

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, April 5, 2009.

committing to a lifetime journey of discovery, a journey in which they will constantly seek to know the Way of Christ. It means that even when they discover that they are walking another way, or a wrong way, they will to seek alter their path to follow that Way of Christ. The ultimate meaning of walking the Way of Christ is not found in a dictionary; it is found in our life.

There is more: baptism is also a sign of new birth, a spiritual birth. There are few things more earthy than a birth. When we baptize by immersion, we really know we have been baptized! It is hard to be neat when you are sopping wet, but it is also hard to deny that something big has happened! When you are immersed, there is not a single part of you that is not dripping wet!

When Jesus was baptized, he heard a voice from heaven that said, %You are my son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased.+ When we come up out of the water of baptism, God says to us: %You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.+ When we are born from above, we are gathered into the loving arms of God.

The Apostle Paul had a wonderful term for it: he liked the phrase %new creation.+ *If anyone is in Christ, he wrote, he [or she] is a new creation, a new creature. The old has gone, behold, the new has come.*²

² II Corinthians 5: 17.

And finally it means being part of the body of Christ, the church. We are given a community at baptism. It's not a perfect community, but it is an essential community. We do not travel the Way of Christ alone. We need one another. It is a community of equals and it is a community of friends. It is a community where we allow God to erase the old dividing lines of race and culture and economic status: *In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, master or slave, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.*³

The differences will always be there, but they are subsumed under the unity of following the Way of Christ. In baptism, we extend our family.

CONCLUSION

Some dear friends of ours have a lovely daughter who has special needs, with both learning and motor skill disabilities. According to her parents, concepts do not come easily for her, and because of that, her parents thought that she might never be baptized. But on the third Sunday of December the year she was sixteen, on the way home from church, she turned to her parents and announced, "I think it is time for me to be baptized."

³ Galatians 3: 28.

They talked about it with her, and she was resolute. So they went to their pastor, who was everything a pastor should be at that moment. He did not speak to her of what she knew, but of what she wished to be. He said to her, "Stephanie, if you receive baptism, you are saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus. Do you want that?" She said yes, and they prayed together. On Christmas Eve of that year, she entered the baptistery, and under the water she went in the presence of the congregation that had nurtured her for all her sixteen years.

In writing about the experience, her father would later say: "Her baptism taught me this: we are all special needs persons, you and I. In some of us it's just a bit more public than in others. Not one of us can ever conceptualize enough to make us worthy of God's grace."⁴

On this Palm Sunday we have gone back to the water with five young people who mark this day as their baptism day, a milestone in their journey of following Christ. They have joined a community of believers who need sustenance along the way.

Three great and powerful symbols: water, bread, wine: all essential for our journey until the day when we gather with all God's people at the river that flows by the throne of God.

⁴ Bill J. Leonard, "At the River," in Walter B. Shurden (ed.), *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision of Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Smyth & Helwys, 1999), pp. 19-20.