

January 11, 2014 – So You Want to be Baptized

Mark 1:4-11

Acts 19:1-7

We have just celebrated the sacrament of baptism and Staci has read two stories of baptism from the New Testament. Let's start with an obvious question... how many of you have been baptized? How many of you remember your baptism? If you can remember it, how old were you? What do you remember? (leave time for a few answers)

Many of us don't remember our baptism, because, like Nolan, we were baptized as infants. Most of us have been baptized, some as infants, some as children, some as adults. But why do we get baptized?

We can look for some hints in today's scripture readings. Let's start with the Gospel of Mark. The first line that Staci read went like this, "And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." For John, baptism was about confessing our sins and being forgiven. John baptized people while they stood in the waters of the Jordan River. They were probably fully immersed in the water during the ritual. Going under the water and back out again symbolized a rebirth – like going back into the womb. It could even be seen as a form of death and resurrection.

The language of rebirth or being "born again" is still used by many Christian denominations, especially those that perform full immersion baptisms such as

our Baptist and Mennonite neighbours. These churches also tend to wait until a person has reached adulthood, or at least late teens, before baptism is performed.

But you're not going to find many baptismal pools in United Church sanctuaries and we also don't tend to use the term "born again." So what does baptism mean for us?

Let's go back to the Gospel of Mark for some more clues. John the Baptizer said, "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water, but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." And then the Gospel goes on to describe the baptism of Jesus. It says that "Immediately upon coming out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: 'You are my Beloved, my Own, On you my favour rests.'" The author of the gospel of Mark wanted to make it clear that John was talking about Jesus and that Jesus' baptism was unlike any that had happened before or since. Jesus was unique, he was especially chosen by God.

So now we're going to jump right over the rest of the Jesus' story and go to the book of Acts. This is a book in the Bible that describes what the followers of Jesus did after he died. One of those followers was Paul. We know quite a bit about Paul because the Bible also contains several letters that he wrote during his ministry. This particular story about Paul happened in a place called

Ephesus. So while he was in Ephesus Paul found some people who had been baptized by John. This meant that they had been given a baptism based on repentance and forgiveness. But when Paul asked them about the “Holy Spirit,” they said they had never even heard of such a thing. So Paul reminded them that John the Baptizer used to preach about a person that would come after him. He explained that Jesus had indeed arrived and that because of Jesus’ deep connection with God they now baptized in Jesus’ name. This baptism was still done with water, but the water now represented the Holy Spirit, or the presence of God.

Since the baptism was now done in Jesus’ name, it also meant that the person being baptized was also becoming a follower of Jesus, they were becoming a member of a community of followers. This is closer to the understanding of baptism that is used in The United Church. For us, infant baptism means that the child’s parents promise that they will bring up their child with a connection to the Christian church. And when we are confirmed as teenagers or adults then we are affirming the decision that our parents made for us as infants. When we go through confirmation, then we are making our own decision to join the church and become full members.

This is the current polity of The United Church of Canada, but there is already work being done that could change our understanding of membership and its relationship with baptism. In fact, just yesterday, I did a quick search on The United Church website and found an article called “A Proposed Model of

Membership.” It was posted on November 28th, just over a month ago. This new model of membership attempts to address some of the concerns that have recently been expressed here at First United. In this new model it would be possible to fully privileged, voting members of a congregation without being baptized or confirmed.

This new model addresses the reality of today’s world and today’s church. As Diana Butler Bass, a prominent theologian and author points out there is a major paradigm shift in church membership. When most of us were baptized and even confirmed, the majority of people in our congregations had grown up in the church. They already knew what to believe, they already knew what was expected from them and so confirmation and membership was a natural result.

But today, there are multiple generations of people who have never been to church. When these people come through our doors, they come seeking relationship – a relationship with the Spirit, and relationship with others who are also searching. They come seeking a place to belong, at least for a while. They come not knowing the doctrine or the protocol. With this new model, these people can have a deep relationship with a faith community even if they are not at a place in their journey where they are ready or able to commit to a particular faith or doctrine.

This proposal is being prepared to present to General Council when it meets in Newfoundland this summer. If you are interested in reading the document, I

have printed several copies and they are available at the welcome table.

As the church continues to change so will the traditions on which it has been formed. But even if baptism is no longer connected to membership, it will still remain as an important part of our faith journey. The water will still remind us of the renewing Spirit active in our lives, and the words will still tell us of our ever-growing relationship to God, to each other and to the church.

Let's listen as the choir sings of the waters of our baptism.