

Homily – Baptism, And
The Rev. Rob Keim
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A year ago, I shared my New Year's resolution with you. I read a lot, and I buy a lot of books. I have three to four hundred books on my shelves that I have never read. So, last year my New Year's resolution was to stop buying new books and just read the ones I already had. And, I am happy to report that of the seventy-three books I read in 2022, fifty-five of them were books from my shelves and only eighteen were newly purchased books. I think fifty-five out of seventy-three is pretty good, and I shared this with my daughter. To which she let me know that she had read one hundred and thirty-two books. This is almost twice as many as I had read. I have to admit that my immediate knee jerk reaction was a sense of disappointment that she had beaten me. In my family of origin, we can get a bit too competitive. Winning or being better is drilled into us.

And, I think this is true of many of us. We are raised to be competitive with one another. We want to be better than others. My team is better than your team. My Country is better than yours. My children are more successful than your children. Competition is at the center of our American culture. Our capitalist economic model has competition at its core. And, Christianity is not immune to competition. Churches compete with one another, and consciously or subconsciously we teach the misled virtue of competition.

The Apostle Paul wrote that the three virtues are faith, hope, and love with love being the greatest of these three. However, it would come as a surprise to many American Christians that competition is not one of these virtues. Deep down I believe we think the virtues are really faith, hope, love and competition and the greatest of these four is competition. Our foundation is built on competition which is a big problem for those of us who want to follow Jesus. Jesus is all about connection, but competition is the great divider. It sets us up as winners and losers. Those who have more or less. We work really hard to be better than others. So today, as we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, I want to look at baptism as the antithesis of competition.

In the Episcopal Church, like many other denominations, we have seven Sacraments. These are ordination of clergy, confirmation, baptism, Eucharist, marriage, reconciliation or confession, and holy unction, also known as healing prayer and last rites. All of these seven Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace. Again, the seven sacraments are ordination of clergy, confirmation, baptism,

Eucharist, marriage, reconciliation or confession, and holy unction, also known as healing prayer and last rites.

Now, today our Gospel reading is about the origin of one our Sacraments. We heard Susan read to us about John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Sometimes we forget that John did not invent baptism. Two thousand years ago, baptism, or ritual washing with water, was already performed in the Temple in Jerusalem. And, it was also practiced outside the Temple by some of the more rigid sects like the Essenes. But there is a difference between the old reason to do baptism and the new reason introduced by John and Jesus.

Before John baptism with water was used as a way to clean away the unhealthy things and to show that a person was now separated from the dirtiness of other people. Baptism was a way to separate clean Jews from unclean Gentiles, but it was also a way to separate clean Jews from unclean Jews. Baptism created two sets of people – the clean ones and the unclean ones. While there were some medical benefits to being clean, the ritual cleansing of baptism would separate one from those who were less than.

Even today, we still have some of this way of thinking. Baptism washes away sin. Baptism cleanses. Baptism allows one to leave behind all of those that are still unsaved. Baptism allows us to join the club of those who are already life's winners.

In this old way of thinking baptism lets us think we are better than others, and at our worst we would only surround ourselves with others who are also life's better people.

This way of thinking about baptism is confusing to me, for John baptized Jesus, and Jesus didn't need to be cleansed. He didn't need to be separate from those who were unclean. We know that Jesus was always reaching out to the outcast.

Now there is another way to think about baptism that better fits with Jesus. It is a way of thinking that goes with an important characteristic of water, and with our rain over the last two weeks we might think that it is that water floods. No. Instead, water connects all living things. And, we can think of baptism as a way to connect or reconnect us to all other things. We can think of baptism as a decision by a person, or by a parent, to leave behind the ways of life that separate us and instead embrace connection.

We do so many things that disconnect us from God and from one another, and baptism is a beautiful way to reject that way of living. However, baptism is not just a way to connect us to people that are already like us, or to things that are pure. Baptism is a connection to the widow and the orphan. It is a link to the sick and the poor. It is a bond to the slave and the foreigner. Can you see that connection is what Jesus did with his baptism? First John the Baptist, and then Jesus turned the whole notion of baptism on end and changed it. Do you think of baptism in the old way of separating the clean or in this new way of connection?

Now, for me spirituality is about connections and relationships. Spirituality is about being in healthy relationship with God, others, and self. Water connects all living things, and the waters of baptism are a spiritual reconnection. It is a way to turn away from a way of life that deadens our souls. This beauty of baptism can take our breath away and replace it with the breath of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a way to embrace the Christ that is already in and around you. It is a way to be inclusive, and to build relationships with those who are different. And, taking on the identity of Christ does not mean embracing yet another identity. Instead, it means laying down the various identities that would define us, and taking on a strong profound solidarity of humanness that is shared with everyone.

Imagine a world in which our churches embraced this newer perspective of baptism.

Imagine a world where we let go of nationalism, racism, classism, sexism and every form of hostility. Imagine a baptism that connects us to those of other faith traditions, and even dare I say, to those that have not yet been baptized. Baptism connects us through Christ to everyone, and that is what we also re-embrace every time we reaffirm our baptism, which we will do in just a moment.

But first, getting back to that misleading virtue. Baptism is the opposite of competition. Competition is about rivalry in which two or more parties strive for the same goal, a goal which cannot be shared. This means that when one person gains the other has to lose. Historically, humans have competed for resources, and recognition, and even mates. The opposite of competition is collaboration and cooperation. The opposite of competition is baptism in which we are connected and in relationship with all. The opposite of competition is the word "and." "And" is a short little word. "And" is a baptism word. Let me use a poem to explain. The poem is by Richard Rohr and it is called The Shining Word "And"

“And” teaches us to say yes

“And” allows us to be both/and

“And” teaches us to be patient and long-suffering

“And” is willing to wait for insight and integration

“And” does not divide the field of the moment

“And” helps us to live in the always-imperfect now

“And” keeps us inclusive and compassionate toward everything

“And” demands that our contemplations become action

“And” insists that our action is also contemplative

“And” is the mystery of paradox in all things

“And” is the way of mercy

“And” makes daily, practical love possible

May you embrace your baptism of connection. It is a gift from Jesus. And, may you day be full of “ands.”