

Homily – The Public Profession of Baptism

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I am not a professional athlete, and I don't play one on television. Nevertheless, I am told that professional athletes have many things that they do before a game. Tie the shoes the same way. Wrap the hockey stick the same way. They stretch and eat the same thing before each game. These repetitive activities are more than habits, for they probably border on superstitions. And, whoa to one who breaks a routine for they shall surely lose. And, it is not just athletes who have superstitions. Sales people who want to win a deal, students who want to ace an exam, and job seekers who want to receive an offer, many of us have magical ways of thinking so that we do a special routine or activity when a win is extra important.

We have other ways of magical thinking as well. I don't believe in the accuracy of tarot cards or astrology, but if it is going to get you out of your ridged, boxed-in way of thinking about something, then have at it. However, some go as far as to believe in the magical accuracy of tarot cards. Or sometimes we think prayer is magical. If we pray the right way, or have enough people praying, or have the priest pray, then a desired outcome is more likely. Often we think of God as a vending machine. If we pray the right way or do enough good deeds then God will give us the new car in the driveway or the desired health of a loved one. For me, magical thinking is when I do A so that B is sure to happen.

Magical thinking often even creeps into our Sacraments of the Church. If I am baptized then I am saved. If I take the Eucharist then I am sure to be rewarded. If I become a priest then I will be able to do magical things that force God to grant certain boons and wishes. Yes, the Sacraments of the Church have extreme benefit but it is not because of a magical way of thinking. Instead, the Sacraments reveal God to us so that we see God is already with us and around us. The Sacraments open us up so that we can chip away at the muck of life that coats us, and we can reveal the beauty that is within in each and every one of us. The Sacraments help us see and experience the universal Christ that permeates all including those other people over there that are not like us. The Sacraments let us accept the connection to all that is from the Holy Spirit.

And, what happens when we see the beauty of Christ in all? The False Self that we all have, our egos, needs to see ourselves as better than others. The False Self contracts, and separates. But, the True Self, the part of us that is of Christ, sees no need to be better than others. The True Self expands and connects. The True Self already knows that it is the beloved of God. You don't have to earn God's love, you already have it. You can't do anything to achieve a greater portion of God's love because God's love

for you is already unconditional, and it is already infinite. And, the Sacrament of Baptism does not make God love you more. However, Baptism and Confirmation are both public statements that you are going to nurture your True Self. You are going to water the seed within you so that it grows and expands and starts to crowd out the False Self.

Now, today our Gospel reading is about the origin of our Sacrament of Baptism. We heard Ken/Doug read to us about John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. *“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”*

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.

However, 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. I think this old way of thinking is a magical way of thinking, and while it may be helpful for those who are new on the spiritual journey it does not help us move forward in that spiritual journey. Let me repeat that. Baptism as cleansing is a magical way of thinking that is helpful for children but is not helpful as we move upward in our spiritual journey with Jesus.

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 remember that water floods. Yes, but that is not the characteristic I want to focus on. 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 the connection of the Holy Spirit. Imagine a world in which we saw ourselves as interconnected. Imagine a world in which we put aside those things that divide us. Baptism is meant to connect us and not to divide us.

There is also another way of thinking about the Sacrament of Baptism that I want to share with you. First some background. One of my fundamental spiritual beliefs is that spirituality is all about relationships. Spirituality is as simple, or complicated, as our relationships with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. God loves us, and in response we love God back, love others because they are the beloved of God, love ourselves, because we are the beloved of God, and love creation because it also is the beloved of God. Our spiritual journey through life is to have healthy loving relationships in all four of these dimensions. Spirituality is relationships and we put Jesus, or more correctly a Trinitarian, framework around how to have healthy, loving relationships. Jesus leads us to healthy spirituality and healthy relationships.

Another foundational part of my spiritual beliefs is that God has made us, has made each human being, with at least three parts of self – the physical self, the mental self, and the spiritual self. The physical part of self is pretty easy to understand. It is these bodies that we have and that we take care of, though many, if not all, of us have challenges with the health of the physical part of self. The mental part of self is our minds and our emotions. Many of us take care of the mental part of self and like our physical health, mental health can also be a challenge. And we have a third part of self which is the spiritual self. Using my earlier definition, the spiritual self is the part of us that is connected in relationship by the Holy Spirit to God, others, self, and Creation. Our spiritual journey through life is to move us into healthy, loving relationships with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human Creation.

And this gets us back to my added reason and explanation of Baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism is a public profession by a person themselves or by a parent. It is a parent publicly acknowledging that their child has a spiritual part of self. Even an infant baby has a spiritual part of self. And with Baptism, they, the parent, commits to aid and guide the child in their spiritual journey. Many deny God and deny that we are on a spiritual journey, but Baptism is a public statement and embrace of the spiritual side of life. And as followers of Jesus, we put a Jesus framework around the spiritual

journey, or more accurately we put a Trinitarian framework around the journey to be in healthy loving relationships.

So, if you are already baptized then remember and work on your spiritual part of self. And, if you are not baptized, or your child is not baptized, then come talk to me about getting baptized, so that you too can embrace and acknowledge the spiritual part of self and get some aide from all of those other people here today, who are also on a spiritual journey.

There is nothing magical about Baptism. Instead, Baptism acknowledges that we already have Christ in us and in and around all others as well. Baptism accepts the connection the Holy Spirit makes between us and all others. Baptism in a public profession that we have a spiritual part of us that is in relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of Creation. With our baptism we feel deep within our hearts and with every cell of our being that we are held in embrace by God who made us, the God who redeemed us, and the God who accompanies us through every end and onward to every beginning. You, and every person who has ever lived, has a spiritual part of self. And at our best we are moving into healthy loving relationships as we unpack the beauty God has already created with us.