

Called to Serve: Our Baptismal Journey
Mark 10: 35-45, Yr. B, October 18, 2015

An old Peanuts cartoon showed Charlie Brown being offered cookies by a friend. The friend offered a choice of chocolate or butterscotch, and someone else whispered in Charlie's ear, "Tell her you can't make up your mind, and she'll give you one of each." So Charlie said just that. The friend offering him cookies says, "Fine, then you cannot have either" and walks away.

There are times when we ask questions, and we do not get the response for which we hope. James and John want to sit beside Jesus into eternity. Jesus asks them if they can endure all that he must endure, and they respond that they can. Jesus' response then is to say, "Well, even if you could, it's not my decision who gets to sit beside me." But Jesus' invitation remains: come to serve the world with me.

To sit at Jesus' right or left is not our life goal. Jesus came to serve, and he also calls us to him to do ministry along with him. Ministry begins the days when we are baptized. This is not the first time I explain to you the role of baptism in our faith. But because this sermon will be posted on our website, let me say this again as a reminder of our tradition.

First, baptism is a call. "Call" is the word often in our minds applied only to pastors, preachers, and missionaries. We may believe that God calls only some people. But I tell you we are all called to serve God in this world. The difference is the nature all call. Baptism is a calling. God sends us into the world to serve people.

If baptism is a call, then it is also a sending ceremony, or commissioning. So you should say to yourself: I am been called and sent by God.

Baptism is a sign of renewal, the beginning of grace. God makes a covenant (agreement) with us, and decided not to separate from us, no matter what. To say that God has made a covenant with us, this is forever. No matter how we live our lives, God's love for us will not diminish. God's agreement stays forever. Just like the covenant God made with Jewish people endures forever.

The Bible records that Jesus was baptized by John, that is, Jesus was willing to identify with us and become one of us. In Jesus' time, baptism carried clear political meanings. Jesus agreed to the cries of John the Baptist, and his criticism of the Roman empire. The Roman emperor called himself a son of God, he offers to the world peace. Followers of Jesus were to oppose this ridiculous claim. For people to come to John and be baptized, such an act was to abandon the worship of Julius Caesar as god, but to worship the one who created heaven and the earth. This baptismal action was about living a different way of life, a God-centered life.

Baptism is to accept God's invitation to join a new community. I do not understand why some people request to be baptized in church, but do not attend church. These people like the identity of a Christian, but don't want to worship with people who are also baptized. This is a contradiction concerning faith and action. This baptized community, their mandate is to serve, not receive entitlement to privilege. Baptism is more than a ritual, it is to participate in a love-centered community where members learn to live justice and love.

Alan Lai

In the Scripture, there are many teachings on water and how water symbolizes new beginning. I think of Noah's Ark, or the Exodus story where ancient Israelites left Egypt through crossing the Red Sea.

Many of us were baptized when we were infants, some when we were adults. No matter when it begins, baptism gives us a mark of being Christian. I propose three characteristics:

First: Through baptism God made a covenant with us. We are God's children, this relationship never ends. Second: Baptism is an outward expression of an invisible faith. Through water, oil, and candles, together with the Word of God, this ritual gives us the blessings of God. Third: it is an expression of grace. It is a gift, unearned.

Our tradition is infant baptism. In my theological thought, baby baptism is the best expression of grace. But there are some faith traditions that require the infant to wait until he or she becomes an adult. It began during the Reformation era in the 16th century. Reformers opposed the Catholic Church, they said their infant baptism when they were babies didn't count.

However, the church preceding the Reformation, from the early church onward, infant baptism was the tradition. I have great respect for other traditions. I have served such churches. Their understandings have its own characteristics and theology. Although not the United Church tradition, I have no reason to discount this alternative understanding. I think the quantity of water is not important, to understand the meaning of this sacrament is important.

Infant baptism tells me what grace is all about. When the baby was born into a Christian family, the baby will be nurtured under the Christian faith. He or she mostly likely will attend church and learn the way of Christ. This is different from others when those people who come to know the gospel in adulthood. From the first day the baby who was born to a Christian home, he or she is a member of a Christian family, also part of the family of Christ.

Although babies cannot answer our belief, we cannot say that this child does not belong to this family! It is like a child who cannot understand the mechanism of how raw rice, after spending some time in a rice cooker, will become a meal you can eat. We cannot say: because they do not understand, they cannot have rice today.

God accepts us not because we understand all of faith, or everything about the truth of the Bible. To say we know everything about faith, it only cultivates an attitude of arrogance. We may think we are loved because we understand and are able to answer. God's grace, is to say to us: even when we do not understand, we got it wrong. God says: I still love you and accept us. Grace has no condition. This is the Toronto Chinese United Church's belief. Grace is freely given to us.

When the baby cannot answer any questions, infant baptism expresses God's love. Its expresses an unconditional love. Infants still need to understand the substance of faith, which is the future's need. Such learning is a lifelong lesson, not to be decided in a day, or two or three confirmation classes.

Finally, baptism is a forgettable start; it reminds me how grace has shaped me the kind of person I have become today. Not through my wisdom, but not my spiritual practice, or any profound theological knowledge. But depends on God's amazing love. The start cannot be not forgotten.

If we say this is a start, and this is our destination. What I mean is this:

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If we start with grace, we need grace to sustain us and guide us until we die. When life is a smooth sailing, we need to remind ourselves we are nurtured by grace. But when we become depressed, we should remember that we are sustained by grace. Our days on earth are limited, so we treasure our opportunity to share love and grace with people.

Baptism set us out to a journey. It is a life-long journey, the journey has its ups and downs, the journey also has happy days and frustrate days. In our journey, we carry this mark. Either excited or lost, not to forget who we are, people deeply loved by God.

Let us pray.