

July 26, 2009

The Rev. Janie Donohue

A Community Baptism

5000 fed from nothing. Jesus walking on the sea. A baptism. An international controversy in the wake of the national church's triennial gathering and this, July 26th, the day we honor Anne, the mother of Mary, in our calendar of the Saints. There are at least seven sermons in this room crying out to be preached. As tempting as it is to preach all of them, I received a request from one of you (no doubt speaking for many of you) that since there is a baptism today perhaps, I might, keep it short...for the children.

Henry. Today you are being baptized. You have no idea what that means. A scratchy outfit, setting in a series of somewhat familiar arms, a wet head. This is your baptism and in Episcopal Christianity we consider this the central act of your entire life. It is the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

I know this must seem odd to you. How can something so strange and simple be any kind of defining moment for my life. Well, I'll tell you I am not sure I get it much more than you do or ever will. It is what we call a mystery. I just have a few more words to try to capture a hint of what we believe happens today.

Now before we do this we are going to recite some things that we believe. You may come to understand these ideas as you grow in faith, or not, but I have to tell you, the Baptisms that Jesus told the first believers to do didn't include a list of common ideas or beliefs. They included really just one thing, and it didn't require any words at all. Repent. Stop wandering around, on your own, unconnected from God or one another. Stop. Tell the truth about your empty, dark and wanting places, and turn around to face your creator, turn and face Hope.

That's the requirement. And people turned, whole families turned and were baptized. And that's you Henry. You are here being baptized today, in the presence of your parents and God-parents and priest, all of us, turning towards God together with you in our arms.

Henry, I am told that you love water. Which is good. You are joining a faith family that has a deep and complex relationship with water. It almost wiped us out once, but then God made a promise to Noah, never again. We were carried through the waters away from our Egyptian oppressors.

John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus, standing in the Jordan, calling the people to come and turn and be clean for the day of God's salvation was near. And of course Jesus himself received John's baptism, turning towards his father, his one true hope.

You know, they used to dunk people's whole bodies at baptism. Still do in many places. Your whole body was submerged under the water and then you would reemerge, sometimes after a somewhat uncomfortable length of time... The delay was intentional. Because what was being enacted was a person not breathing on his own any more, but being God breathed, or having his power and life flow straight from the source, the Spirit of the living God.

I know, heavy stuff. A mystery, as I have said. But real, I promise. We go under water and leave our broken selves there, the things we have done and left undone. The wounds we have suffered and inflicted. They are washed away under water. And when we come back up we are new. Brand new. Breath-new.

As you grow in faith, you will remind yourself of this rebirth whenever someone comes before a font to be made new by the Holy Spirit. You won't ever be re-baptized, because you can never be unbaptized. Today we mark you as Christ's own forever, and you will never escape the embrace of God no matter how you might try. You won't be re-baptized but you will remember your this new birth. But I have to warn you, there will be times when you won't want to re-member. Or you'll prefer to remember in part.

In medieval times, I am told, when a knight was baptized he held his sword out of the baptismal waters: many say that the current practice of most Episcopalians is to hold our wallets and checkbooks out of those waters.

But I do wonder why knights did that, prevented their swords from being submerged. Was the soldier afraid it would get rusty, ruined and made ineffectual. A waste really, a sword that can't dismember. I wonder if they thought it wrong to let such a shameful thing near God, perhaps embarrassed by the blood stains on the hilt. Whatever the reason, there were parts of those knights which were held back from the transforming love of God.

This practice is not unique to medieval knights. Most of us carry at least one dry sword, thoughts and things we protect from the waters of redemption. That person we won't forgive. *Is it* our finances, held far above our heads, as the rest of us willingly takes the plunge?

And what about our time? Are we willing to let God determine the priorities of our day? Is God the boss of our Blackberry? And do we trust God with our loved ones? our children, our mates, our parents and partners. One and forever baptized we each tend to reach down and try to rescue certain aspects of our lives from the holy, healing water.

Henry, you have given us a great gift this morning, the opportunity to remind ourselves of our eternal hope. We can once again re-imagine our lives and selves submerged in those waters that hovered over creation, that buoyed Noah, and rescued Israel. The waters of the womb. Today we

can intentionally re-enter that place of complete dependence. And at the right time to feel again our miraculous resuscitation. To be born again.

Henry, I know, you just got born the first time and are probably not ready for a do-over just yet. But we are.

Henry Patrick Waddell, we are welcoming you into the household of faith and promising to support you as you grow in the knowledge and love of God. The most important way we can *keep* that promise to you is to stand before this font with you, today and every day, to lay down our swords and get ready to *really live* the abundant Christian life.