



ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH

Cedar Run Episcopal Parish, *The Rev. Dr. Peter R. Gustin, Rector*

The Adult Class

April 30 or May 7

The Sacraments

Sacrament of the Week: Baptism

What it Is

Baptism is maybe the most loaded of all the sacraments. It is loaded with history (baptisms are as old as the Promised Land; John the Baptist did not invent them), with old understandings about “unbaptized babies” and new understandings about adoption into the Household of God, and deeply held beliefs about original sin and its place in the lives of the people of the Church.

How it Works

In its present liturgical form, Baptisms have three parts: they begin with the presentation and examination of the candidates, then continue with what appear to be prayers for the dead and dying, and conclude with the blessing of the water, the Baptism itself, the consignation (signing of the person’s forehead and sealing the person as “Christ’s own forever”), and the congregation’s welcome into the Household of God.

What it Does

Baptism has always been a ritual washing, a cleansing. There is, as far as I can tell, no getting around the fact of “original sin” (the sin of Adam that we all inherited), and our Baptismal language talks about “...those who here are cleansed from sin and born again” (BCP p. 307, during the blessing of the water).

More than cleansing from sin, however, the most important thing a Baptism does, even if it is not done by a priest or deacon with the exact right words, “seals the person by the Holy Spirit and marks the person as Christ’s own forever” (BCP p. 308). Nothing we do can remove the seal of Baptism or remove us from being marked as Christ’s own forever. There is simply no sin powerful enough to remove the consignation. If such a sin existed,

Baptism would be meaningless. (“You are sealed and marked until you screw it up?”) While Baptisms are most often performed by priests or deacons, the earliest Christian Baptisms were performed only by a bishop, who confers the authority to Baptize to deacons at their ordination. Today, anyone can Baptize anyone else, and “emergency Baptisms” are still quite common.

Why Do It?

As I said before, the “old” understanding of Baptism was that it washed away original sin; the old implication of that understanding was, sadly, that no one could get into Heaven without being Baptized. But do we really believe that? Do our Scriptures support such an understanding?

While people can debate those questions from now until the Yom Yahweh, the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, we Anglicans prefer to think of Baptism as initiation into God’s Household. We make a big deal of renouncing Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that draw us from the love of God. The “death” we observe at Baptism is a death of self-centeredness, which for my money, is the same thing as original sin. We are born thinking that we are the center of the universe; maturity helps most of us with that misconception, and God’s grace does the rest.

Questions for Consideration/Discussion

1. Do unbaptized babies go to Heaven?
2. Do you think Baptism is more important for our life or for our death?
3. A lot of Christian denominations (Baptists, especially) Baptize into the local congregation, which means a person can be Baptized as often as he or she wants. We Episcopalians are rabid about insisting that Baptism (at least in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) is a one-time deal. Why?
 - 4a. Your precious son married and had a baby. He and his lovely wife don’t want to have their baby Baptized; instead, they want to child to “decide for him/herself” later in life. Is that okay?
 - 4b. A lot of people in your position will lick their thumb, swipe it across the baby’s forehead, and Baptize the kid in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Is that okay?