

Everyday Baptisms

Acts 2:14a and 36-41

Delivered: Bellflower Christian Church – Bellflower, IL

It's difficult to imagine the emotional intensity in the days following Jesus resurrection and in the days following Jesus ascension back into the heavens. For those who found themselves witnessing Jesus death and later, witnessing a resurrected Jesus who overcame death, there must have been feelings of emotional chaos for everyone who witnessed or heard first-hand about such an event.

However, after Jesus ascension, it would be too safe to say there would also have been feelings of confusion. Because after witnessing such a climatic conclusion to the Christ story, Jesus followers were left behind with the question, "okay, now what?"

For Peter and the other apostles, there was no action plan left behind on exactly how to transform this prophetic movement within a sect of Judaism or how to channel "the emotional high" among the people looking for answers following Christ's ascension back into the heavens. Yet, Peter delivers a message to the crowd that not only taps into the lingering emotional high left by the departed Jesus but gives them an answer to their lingering question, "okay now what?"

Peter starts his speech in Acts 2: 36 by calling for repentance through the act of baptizing. The idea of repentance is a key motif in the book of Acts. And it's central to Peter's message to the Israelites and later to Paul's message to the Gentiles. What we see in this text is Peter presenting the idea that baptism is the primary call to a new life as an act of established discipleship. Peter illustrates the need for baptizing oneself because it demonstrates one's need to see repentance. In a way, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Spirit are offered in a bundle package and are offered as an attractive deal that doesn't require one to sign up for a two-year commitment by Verizon Wireless or AT&T.

This bundle package offers two angles. One is positive and the other is negative. First, the gospel presents us the "Good News" angle that God has established Jesus as Christ and Lord. Peter preaches that Jesus is the anointed one, set forth to be savior or redeemer of a humanity in distress.

The negative angle of Peter's sermon is that gospel delivers the bad news that humanity rejects God's work. Peter presents and confronts them with guilt—the message that they stand in opposition to God. In face of this message, however, Peter gives them a source of hope. "now when they heard this they were cut to the heart and said, "What shall we do?"

In response to this, the people act not defensively, but responsively. They respond out of guilt by having themselves baptized.

For us as modern day readers of this text, there are many theological debates as to what Peter was referring to when it came to repentance and baptism. Questions such as, "are sinners forgiven only after repenting and being baptized? Is the spirituals arrival

dependent upon these prerequisites?" As readers of the text, we don't know answers to these questions. But Acts does not seem too concerned with them. Acts is more interested in illustrating the compelling force of the spirits movement and the resurrection of the crucified Jesus has given birth to the fulfillment of the prophecy. And through that fulfillment, we see "the church" emerging as a community where lives are connected and transformed by a boundless God that through Jesus, gives us the opportunity to seek repentance and second chances in our own lives.

In Christianity, the act of being cleansed by water is not only seen as a symbolic act of renewal, but the act of being cleansed by water is also seen a symbolic act of renewal and re-commitment with our relationship with the divine. And for many other religions, it carries the same symbolic purpose.

In Islam, water is important for cleansing and purifying. Muslims must be ritually pure before approaching God in prayer. Some mosques have a courtyard with a pool of clear water in the center, but in most mosques, the ablutions are found outside the walls.

In Judaism, ritual washing is intended to restore or maintain a state of ritual purity and its origins can be found in the Torah. These ablutions can be washing the hands, the hands and the feet, or total immersion which must be done in 'living water', i.e. the sea, a river, a spring or in a river. Priests had to wash their hands and feet before taking part in Temple services. The ritual washing of hands is performed before and after meals and on many other occasions.

And in Hinduism, water in Hinduism has a special place because it is believed to have spiritually cleansing powers. To Hindus, all water is sacred, especially rivers. Although Hinduism encompasses so many different beliefs among those that most Hindus do share is the importance of striving to attain purity and avoiding pollution. This relates to both physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being.

It was about seven years ago that I picked up running as exercise. For me, I always found myself having a difficult relationship with it as an activity but later to picked up to get in better shape.

One summer in my early 20s while back home in Western Pennsylvania, I was running on a dusty dirt trail on an overcast and humid day. With cramps forming on my side and aches in my back, I found myself determined to push myself to do three miles before I was to quit.

But as I found myself ready to collapse, I started to feel a cool breeze run through my hair. Looking down onto the ground, I started to see drops of water fall onto the hot dusty path. It was at that moment I stopped paying attention to my music and could hear the wind blowing through the trees followed by feeling drops of cold water seeping through my shirt and cooling my sunburned skin.

Unfortunately, however, the small random drops that mystified me got bigger very

quickly.

As I began to run faster, the drops started to come down so fast they didn't feel like rain drops at all, but like millions of needles falling onto me simultaneously. But for some reason, it didn't hurt. And with the wind then blowing green leaves off of trees and across the trail, the rain began to run off the path and roll down a hill. At the same time, I felt I was dancing for an audience when I purposely splashed in puddles of water while a middle-aged jogger sat on a bench and laughed as I danced like I was Gene Kelly performing in film, "Singing in the Rain."

And finally, when I did reach that last mile marker, my headphones were off of my ears as I could feel a sensational feeling come over my entire body. With my head up in the sky as the rain continued to fall on my face, I felt the presence of God as the rain washed the sweat out of my eyes and allowed me to see the sun which was starting to sneak through the rain clouds. Never before in my life did I go from feeling intense physical pain to suddenly experiencing such a physical sensation and spiritual renewal within a short frame of time.

I am sure many of us have had such experiences like this being either caught in the rain where we were able to express that inner child seeking to be released. These experiences are often reminders of our own baptism. Not that baptism is not necessary an act of repentance and finding salvation. Because after all, it's through Jesus Christ we find that repentance and salvation.

But for us as Christians, these moments and the act of baptism are symbolic for they illustrate the releasing our own doubts, insecurities, shortcomings, and allow ourselves to bind with God in a way no other experience can. Even if it's only for a moment.

One of the television shows I enjoy is Mad Men. The show, which takes place in the 1960s, showcases the life inside a Madison Avenue advertising agency. The show's protagonist, a good looking, talented, and confident advertising executive named Don Draper, makes his millions selling advertising pitches to some of the biggest businesses in America at the time ranging from Chevrolet, Lucky Strike Cigarettes, Mohawk Airlines, and others.

Yet despite Don's success in his professional life and having the imagery of success in his personal life with a wife and three small children, he lives a second life that is often hidden from everyone else. In his second life, he is alcoholic who is a womanizer that struggles with depression and loneliness stemming from his abusive and painful childhood of being neglected.

In Season 2's final episode, we see Don, whom after is kicked out of the house by his wife, runs away to California after he finds himself hitting an all time low as he is confronted with the realities of his failings as a father, husband, and as a man.

Yet just before we wonder what will happen to this fallen Madison Avenue hotshot, we see Don find compassion after someone shows him, unconditional love. And at the end of the episode, Don steps out into the Pacific Ocean and baptizes himself while the song "Cup of Loneliness" by George Jones plays in the background.

Even though Don Draper's character is truly fictional, what has made this show transcend with a lot of people is how much the character of Don relates to them. Granted, it can be hard for many of us to relate to a 1960s advertising executive on Madison Avenue who drives a Cadillac and often walks out on his job only to find his job waiting for him when he comes back after a few weeks. But what we do see is a character that has the imagery of success and status on the outside while struggling with feelings of guilt, insecurity, loneliness and failure. And throughout the series, like many of us do, he desperately seeks liberation from himself in different ways.

How often do we find ourselves feeling fatigued by constantly seeking to portray ourselves as successful and have everything altogether when in reality we find ourselves inside barely managing to get by day to day? How often do we find ourselves experiencing loneliness despite living a life of having constant attention from family and friends who are around us? How often do we feel guilty about our moral failures and those we've hurt and those we've let down such as our spouses, children, or siblings because of our past failures that they may or may not know about?

What does it take to liberate ourselves? Does it take fleeing to California and jumping into the Pacific Ocean after everything has truly fallen apart while George Jones sings "Cup of Loneliness" in the background? Does it take running in the rain and jumping in puddles to find such liberation? Or does it take shedding our tears in private or during an awkward time to let out all that we have been holding back?

One of my favorite Christian writers is Anne Lamott. If you aren't familiar with Anne Lamott, she is a middle-aged Christian writer from California whose writes from what I like to call a "real life" perspective. Lamott, who not only overcame drug addictions but also the difficulties of raising a child on her own, is able to illustrate the ability to find grace despite personal struggle and failure. Her writings speak to a lot of Christians because she is able to convey a realistic truth of the struggles we have and the grace we desperately seek in our lives.

Lamott writes, "Can you imagine the hopelessness of trying to live a spiritual life when you're secretly looking up at the skies, not for illumination or direction but to gauge, miserably, the odds of rain? Can you imagine how discouraging it was for me to live in fear of weather, of drizzle, or downpour? Because Christianity is about water: "Everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." It's about baptism, for God's sake. It's about full immersion, about falling into something elemental and wet. Most of what we do in worldly life is geared toward our staying dry, looking good, not going under. But in baptism, in lakes and rain and tanks and fonts, you agree to do something that's a little sloppy because at the same time it's holy and absurd. It's about surrender, giving in to all those things we can't control; it's a willingness to let go of balance and decorum and get drenched."

Theologian Daniel Miligore writes that Christian baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the life in Christ. It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and discipleship that lasts throughout one's life.

"Jesus uses the image of baptism in relating the life of his disciples to own mission of self-expending love," Miligore writes. The event of baptism thus marks the beginning of the Christian anticipation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It signals one's death to an old way of life and one's birth to the new life in Christ."

If you watched the entire series of *Mad Men*, you know that despite his self-baptizing in the end of Season 2, Don continues to go through a cycle of finding grace and renewal at the end of each season only to revert to his previous bad habits at the beginning of the next season. Though, after all, if he didn't revert to his own failures and struggles, there wouldn't be subsequent seasons of the show for many to enjoy.

But maybe it's also more than that. Maybe it's also because it's not real life. Despite the acts of baptism we experience in religious settings or those euphoric spiritual moments from running, swimming, or crying, it's in our human nature that despite these moments we will continue to struggle with feelings of loneliness and disappear, but through random moments of euphoric grace, we are continually reminded that someday we will be completely liberated from it.

Because of no matter the mistakes and failures we make and the second chances we seek, it's through continual grace through symbolic acts of cleansing we are reminded that in the end when all is said and done, we find redemption and liberation. And for us, the cleansing of our bodies and souls through the symbolic act of baptism through water from the ocean, the baptismal pool at a church, or through our own tears, illustrates the everlasting grace we receive from God.

"Once you have grace, you are free." writes Thomas Merton. "Without it, you cannot help doing the things you know you should not do, and that you know you don't really want to do. But once you have grace, you are free. When you are baptized, there is no power in existence that can force you to commit a sin — nothing that will be able to drive you to it against your own conscience. And if you merely will it, you will be free forever, because the strength will be given you, as much as you need, and as often as you ask, and as soon as you ask, and generally long before you ask for it, too."

My friends, baptism is a symbolic act that reminds us of the renewal we find in Christ. For us, it's the symbolic act of our baptism whether it's something we experienced when we were an infant or as an adult in a church or whether we experienced while standing outside in a summer's rain, that's a reminder that through Jesus Christ, we will find liberation not just from those around us or the struggles in our lives that hold us down. But we are reminded that we will be liberated from the doubts, guilt, and failures of ourselves through Jesus Christ.

And whether it's being cleansed by the waters of rain, of the oceans, or by our own tears, it's truly a gift worth celebrating by dancing in the rain.

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