

“Bath”

“Sarah Jo Sarchet once pastored a Presbyterian church in Chicago. A 10 year-old boy in her congregation named Cameron, walked into her office and said he needed to talk to her. Fresh from soccer practice, and wearing his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, he had a request for her. ‘I’d like to be baptized,’ he said. ‘We were learning about Jesus’ baptism in Sunday School. The teacher asked the class who was baptized, and all the other kids raised their hands. I want to be baptized too.’

Using her best pastoral care tone of voice, she said, ‘Cameron, do you really want to be baptized because everyone else is?’ His freckles winked up at her and he replied, ‘No. I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God.’

She was touched by his understanding. ‘Well, then,’ she said, ‘How about this Sunday?’ His smile turned to concern and he asked, ‘Do I have to be baptized in front of all those people in the church? Can’t I just have a friend baptize me in the river?’ She asked where he came up with that idea. ‘Well, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in a river, wasn’t he?’

Caught off guard, she conceded, ‘You have a point. But, if a friend baptized you in the river, how would the church recognize it?’ Realizing this was a teachable moment, she climbed up on her foot stool to reach for her Presbyterian Book of Order that was located on the highest shelf. But before she placed her hand on the book, he responded.”

“I guess by my new way of living’ he said.”

“She nearly fell off the foot stool and left the Book of Order on the shelf. Cameron’s understanding was neither childish nor simple. It was profound. Baptism calls us to a new way of living. (Found on sermons.com from a sermon by Sarah Jo Sarchet preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago)

Cameron’s insight and understanding intrigued Rev. Sarchet much like the Apostle Paul was curious about the Christian experience of new believers in Ephesus. His conversation with them was not only surprising to him but, also, to the recent converts. **Paul asked in verses 2-3, “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?*” *‘We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,’ they answered. ‘Well, then, what kind of baptism did you receive?’ Paul asked. ‘The baptism of John,’ they answered.”***

Because of the Ephesians’ response, the Apostle recognized those new followers needed a better understanding and a fuller – more complete experience. Paul explained in **verses 4-6, “*The baptism of John was for those who turned from their sins; and he told the people of Israel to believe in the one who was coming after him — that is, in Jesus.*” *When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul placed his hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them; they spoke in strange tongues and also proclaimed God’s message.*”** Unfortunately, the popular understanding of Christianity, especially of Baptism is very much like that which was held by those new followers in Ephesus.

Specifically, the public view is to emphasize repentance as confession of sin with the expectation that somehow one earns forgiveness. However, the more accurate description of Christian Baptism focuses on it being the sign of God’s Forgiveness, which we do not deserve, and the time, when we realize the reality of that Reconciliation with our Divine Parent, while we receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit and in response commit ourselves to living out that New Relationship with God. Coming out of that understanding, we “repent” in the sense our lives are transformed from the old way of self-destruction to the new path of God’s Self-Giving and Suffering Love.

Paul’s discussion with the Ephesian Christians raised the topic of the Baptism done by John and, especially, his baptism of Jesus. Most of the time the Baptist and Jesus’ Baptism are studied, folks usually use the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, I suspect Paul was also aware of the Gospel of

John's account. I say that because the Gospel of John and Paul both revealed the Baptist's calling included declaring Jesus was the Messiah. The Synoptic Gospels inferred John was making the way ready for the coming of Jesus. In the Gospel of John's account, we are told the Pharisees wanted to know why the Baptist baptized. John the Baptist answered with a response like those found in the Synoptics. However, the Gospel of John went on to report in **verses 29-31**, ***"The next day John saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.' I did not know who he would be, but I came baptizing with water in order to make him known to the people of Israel."***

In addition to reporting the Baptizer came to make the Messiah – the Son of God "known to the people of Israel", the Gospel of John went on to provide a more complete account of Jesus' Baptism than those found in the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel of John stated in **verses 32-34**, ***"And John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and stay on him. I still did not know that he was the one, but God, Who sent me to baptize with water, had said to me, 'You will see the Spirit come down and stay on a man; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen it,' said John, 'and I tell you that he is the Son of God.'"*** John the Baptist not only baptized Jesus but his baptism of our Lord became the proof to the Baptizer, so he actually pointed Jesus out as the Son of God to some of his own disciples! The Synoptics did not include that information.

Now, let's focus on our own Baptism – Jesus baptizing us with the Holy Spirit. During the Threshold Moment it was said, ***"Christian baptism is rife with meaning. Paul invites the early believers depicted in the Acts story to go beyond one teaching of baptism into the fullness of living in the Spirit of Christ available to them. On this day we remember our baptism and affirm the Spirit that lives and moves and breathes through us – offering power and strength beyond what we think we have."***

In the Gospel of John's report about the Baptism of Jesus, we are informed he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and that the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus provided John the Baptizer the proof he needed to recognize Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God. Obviously, the Holy Spirit played a major role in Jesus' experience! It continues to do so! I do not say that to encourage everyone to break into speaking in tongues, especially not the type of talking, which no one else can understand. Instead, the Holy Spirit continues to play a crucial part in Jesus' baptizing us with the Holy Spirit.

Why is that the case and why is it important for us to know and experience the Holy Spirit? First of all, we need all the help we can have to go up against the hatred, anger, and violent way of life encouraged by the world. The Holy Spirit is a deep and an abiding power for us, so we are strengthened and empowered in the face of adversity! Depend on the presence of the Holy Spirit so you are able to turn from the Old Way of Sin and Death and allow God's New Way of Agape Love and Life lead you into the New Relationship with God and with everyone you meet. The Holy Spirit also guides us, when we might not know how or where to go, so we are able to follow the New Life in Christ! Let us trust the guidance of God's Holy Spirit and listen to, watch, and follow its leading. Yes, even as Cameron shocked his Pastor and as the new believers – disciples in Ephesus experienced a new spiritual awareness when the Apostle Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus, we can join in greater insight through the Spirit. In a few moments, each one of us will have the opportunity to renew our affirmation of the Gift of the Holy Spirit and our commitment to living the Spirit filled New Life in Christ through our Remembrance of our Baptism ceremony. Make use of that opportunity and consciously celebrate and depend of the continual presence of God's Holy Spirit with us and yourself. Amen.