

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

19 Pentecost
October 10, 2004
Fr. Bill McGinty

“I Baptize You...”

There are very few of us who can remember our own baptism. It just happened too long ago and too far away. I think I can safely say I am the only one still alive from my own Baptismal service. Today, however, we have two people scheduled for Baptism who will remember it for the rest of their lives. In some ways you could say we are going back to the tradition and custom of the early church in baptizing grown people rather than infants.

Baptism, however, is not an individual event; it is a communal event. For today we are welcoming two people into the family of Christ's Church, into the living Body of Christ.

With infant baptism we are often tied up with the miracle of new life and the celebration of new life. In adult baptism we are clearly celebrating a proclamation of faith! People saying, “Yes to Christ as the Lord of their life.” Today Brittany and Valerie have chosen to answer Jesus' call “Come follow me!” In doing so they embrace Jesus, his teaching, his values and his salvation.

From this day, his sign will be their sign, his message will be their message, and his mission will be their mission.

Two thousand years ago twelve men stepped ashore from their fishing boats and followed Jesus as his disciples. They were, in the next thirty years, able to change the world.

The decision Brittany and Valerie have made today is identical to that of those twelve disciples in every way. They have been called. They have answered and they have chosen to follow Jesus and for the rest of their life. Today they take the Book of the Gospels out into the world in response to Jesus command, “Go and teach all nations!” Today, the cross becomes their symbol and this flag of a Red Cross and white stars becomes their flag as they embrace our Episcopal tradition.

Jesus has stepped into our lives and his presence has changed everything. Baptism not only brings us into Christ's Kingdom, but it also turns us into crusaders for the Gospel. Just as Jesus could not pass the sick or the handicapped, the poor or the weak, neither can we. Baptism transforms us from mere followers to apostles, it makes pro-active such that our faith becomes like the air we breathe and the food we eat.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the life of Augustine in the Fifth Century. Augustine lived in the City of Hippo on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. His mother Monica was a Christian, but Augustine refused to acknowledge religion or God.

Despite the fact that he had an exceptional brain and great intelligence, Augustine cared nothing for his fellow man or seeking truth. He preferred to spend his time on a life of constant partying and wild drinking. He was constantly in trouble with the law and his

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mother despaired of him settling down or ever making anything of himself. Around the age of 30, he was sent to Rome to escape the retribution of the authorities after another wild episode. In Rome, Augustine's life of careless disregard for God's law continued. In 378 he found himself in Milan and was walking one day in the garden of the great Cathedral Church when he met a man called Ambrose.

Ambrose was the Bishop of Milan, a scholar and a Holy man. The two began talking, and for the first time in his life, Augustine found someone who could answer all his questions. What happened next is one of the great conversion stories of history. Augustine listened and heard God speak to him in Ambrose's words. Augustine was baptized in the Cathedral and his life changed forever.

Augustine returned to Africa to his home town of Hippo. He intended to live out his life as a monk, but God had other plans for him; to be their Bishop, a role he filled for 35 years. But it was as a writer and a great teacher of theology that Augustine made his mark. Baptism had changed the complete direction of his life. He could no longer go back to his old ways. Now his life belonged to Christ; the Christ that gave it meaning and purpose.

Baptism changes each one of us in a similar way. It makes us all children of God, and therefore, brothers and sisters. Although at times you would never know that. Baptism leaves a mark that is indelible. But it is when we pause to contemplate how we are living and our baptism today that we Christians come face to face with the raw truth of our faith. If baptism is truly a gift, and an invitation to follow Jesus, then it is enough for us to simply think of baptism as an invitation or the joining of God's family. Baptism must be an activity, a never-ending pursuit of living, teaching and practicing what Jesus gave the blueprint for: the Kingdom of God.

Being baptized a Christian means that you know something other people do not know. You know the answer to life! You know that 13 1/2 billion years ago the Universe began not just with the Big Bang, but with God's plan. You know the answer to the question scientists ask today, "Is our expanding, accelerating Universe multi-dimensional?"

Well yes, it sure is, and its other greatest dimension is a force that is pure spirit and infinite in terms of time and space. We call that God's presence, which both gives things being and holds them in being.

Jesus' presence in our midst is neither arbitrary nor accidental. In a sense it is the next stage in our evolution; to go boldly where no one has gone before; to not only conquer the Universe, but go beyond the Universe to a life of infinite possibilities.

We get a glimpse of those possibilities every time Jesus performs a miracle. It is as if one world for a brief moment touches another. In that moment, God's power comes bursting through as if from another dimension. All Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount to Jesus teaching his disciples revolves around Jesus showing us how to tap into a power greater than ourselves. Through the Holy Spirit, guiding and helping us, that power lifts

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and elevates us and brings into God's world his values and places us on road to the future that culminates with God's life forever.

If you had a secret like that, wouldn't you want to share it? Wouldn't you want to rush out into the street and stop people and tell them, "Hey, have you heard what Jesus is actually saying? He's saying war should end, because it's barbaric and gets us nowhere. Love is good because through it we grow and become more like God. Pain and suffering have meaning if we use them to reach out to others. Forgiveness is a grace that always comes back to bless us because it has God's face stamped upon it!"

Baptism introduces us to a whole new existence; without a doubt it is the warp drive that accelerates our journey to God. For the rest of us today, it reminds us, to climb on board, buckle up, and drive our lives towards the light of God's love. Baptism is not a one-off event. It is something we are called to each day of our lives. Today I wake up a Christian and my baptism calls me to follow the Lord, to live the Gospel; to create a better world, here in this place that I live. The water of baptism is living water but we are God's living people.

Let's us pray.

Lord as you were baptized in the River Jordan so we baptize Brittany and Valerie today. Just as you received the Holy Spirit so we call down the Spirit on these two new disciples. Shower them with your saving grace, and make them your disciples. Baptize each one of us anew that in this place your Kingdom may reign. We thank you for the gift of Brittany and Valerie.

Amen +