



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

On baptism
Epiphany 1, Year A
Sunday, January 12, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

I ran into a theological quandary right before Christmas. It was about my niece, Jolene, perfect and pink and bald as ever at 14 months old. My sister, her mom, who like the rest of my family is disinterested at best in religion, texted me out of the blue with a question: did I think Jolene ought to be baptized?

You might think I had a very simple answer to this, but asking this of a priest is sort of like asking a philosopher "What can I be sure of?" Or someone who over-shares, "How are you?" Or asking a group of Memphians, "What barbecue place should I eat at in my 24-hour visit to Memphis?"

In other words, I'd develop incapacitating carpal tunnel in my thumbs trying to tap out a sufficient answer for her. And of course, more than that, it is a general rule that these sorts of questions are never about finding the rulebook's answer and are mostly about the asker herself, so I said I'd love to hear what she was thinking about over Christmas if she wanted to talk about it.

The answer from Christianity depends on where you've been at in time and place. Here's what we agree on: baptism is an entrance rite into Christian community. You go under the waters and it's more than cleansing, it's dying to the old life and then to be regenerated to a new one — identifying with Christ, to die as He did in order to be raised like He was, and now living this new life in community with others.

But some have doubted its efficacy. What if that new, resurrected life seems suspiciously like that old life before baptism? I had a friend in seminary who had been baptized no less than 18 times, something allowed and even encouraged in his tradition — hoping for the occasion when it would stick and make him new. Now, most of the time by a majority of folks, Christendom has affirmed one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. But the problem remains: what to do with our tendency to sully our newly gleaming souls? At one point in history, people would wait for their deathbeds in order to be baptized — that way, they'd die before they had much of a chance to get back in trouble. That one was hard to predict, and if they recovered from the deathbed after baptism, well...

Infant baptism seems to have been customary as early as the 2nd century, some argue since the inception of the church, as entire households converted to the faith. Of course, this becomes particularly pressing after Augustine comes around in the 4th century and develops the doctrine of original sin; officially, then, babies were also in danger of dying in unrepentance — and given infant mortality rates, that danger was paramount. My sister, for the record, said that she believes Jolene is a complete innocent in no need of repentance — a statement I was a little less inclined to believe after watching Jo delight in chasing and tormenting the dogs for two days, or when she would slowly pull her hand back and smile sweetly when she got caught touching the Christmas tree, which was not allowed. She's got this figured out already?

And what about this entrance to community? To tell a secret between us, you and me and our Youtube channel, I want nothing more than to baptize Jolene, to put this holy water onto her head and pronounce

her Christ's own, forever, to envelope her in this connection to God and to us and to the communion of saints — to impart to her that dark knowledge that she will pass like all of us from life into death into Life, that she would grow knowing that this gift was indelible, absolute, given to her before memory, in the same her family's love has been given, to define her like her own name. My pause was this: if the intention was not to enter into Christian community, could I advise them to do it?

All the way through the prayer book of 1662, the question you affirmed upon being baptized or if you were the parent or godparents of one being baptized, was: "Wilt thou then obediently keep God's holy will and commandments and walk in the same all the days of thy life?" We are more specific now — we broke that down into five simple questions about what it means to obediently keep God's holy will and commandments. We ask first, Will you devote yourself to Christian teaching, fellowship, the Eucharist? The answers are simple: I will or I won't.

So what about the won'ts? We reach something that most Christians struggle with at some point. What about those who say no?

Simone Weil was a brilliant woman, a French Christian mystic who died in the 1940s. She died of a willful sort of malnutrition — she refused to have anything more to eat than the French troops on the front lines of the war. This one instance of her deep conviction: that God came to identify with the poorest and lowest among us, and so she would, too, in a state of self denial. A self-emptying, like God's, and one so costly it would take her life, as it did the life of Christ.

But this identification with the poorest and lowest also made Simone Weil refuse baptism. She was Christian, yes, a saint arguably— but to her, baptism would separate her from those on the outside, the unsaved, the untended, the babies who never had a chance, the multitudes who had never heard the Gospel. She would not join a club and become one of the chosen. She would stay with the outsiders.

The average Episcopalian would elect for baptism, I think, and wouldn't see it as an exclusion. "To each their own," you might say, or something about many paths to God, Christian baptism being one of them — and that's good. But that answer never really satisfied me much; seemed to take the impetus out of the action.

What I've thought, and I'm ashamed that I might even think of arguing with an intellectual giant like Simone Weil, but here I am unable to help myself... I've thought about all we've heard in Scripture about God choosing a certain people or electing a specific group — is that this chosen-ness is always on behalf of someone else. God says, I choose you, Israel... to be a light to the nations. That somehow, everyone in the whole world would see the glory of the Lord because you were chosen, not for your sake — but for the sake of the rest of us. You and me, brought in because they were chosen.

And this is a pattern with that calling, which if Scripture tells us anything, it certainly doesn't come to the special or the talented or the clever, but through something you'd almost call God's whimsy or pleasure — and it's always given in order that others would find their chosen-ness, too.

It is not a club at all, but a holy responsibility.

And indeed, we claim that when we baptize babies. The parents and godparents, and everyone in this room, all chosen by God to act as lights for these little lives to find their way through this confusing and wounded world into the promise given to them, to us, to all of creation: that they could know God, sometimes just by looking around.