

Baptism and Holy Communion

God's abounding and amazing grace comes to us in very surprising ways and means and often in settings unlike any others we have experienced.

We celebrate two sacraments in the United Methodist Church--Baptism and Holy Communion.

Let us take a historical and Biblical quick review of each of these celebrations that God has left with us as divine elements of grace.

BAPTISM

Water has always been believed to have cleansing and healing properties. Biblical Archaeologists in Israel have uncovered small pools near the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem. In John the Baptist and Jesus day, it was common practice for the faithful to pass through the water to purify themselves before entering the temple. In particular, new believers entering the Jewish faith passed through the water as a sign of their new life. The baptism of John at the Jordan came from these roots. It was a sign of purification and a sign of new faith. Jesus met John on the shore of the Jordan and asked for that water-baptism. It was this act that changed water-baptism to a completely new understanding and meaning - - when God joined in the act through action of the Holy Spirit. The new Christian church was quick to pick up on this and became part and parcel of the act of becoming a new Christian. Jesus made it quite clear that salvation was a faith issue and baptism was the sign that signified a changed life. It is clearly a sign of grace by God that we claim as followers of God's son - - Jesus Christ.

Almost from the beginning "the church" began to "tweak" this act of God's grace and slowly but surely took it completely away from God and it has by and large become "property of the church."

Let me site some examples - -

Some faith groups proclaim that this grace of God is only valid as they practice it and it is not valid anywhere else. If you are not a member of their faith group then your baptism is not valid.

Some faith groups proclaim that unless you are baptized in their baptistry then you are not a claimed child of God.

Some faith groups insist that you are not baptized unless your entire body is immersed in water.

Some faith groups insist that baptism is not valid unless certain words are said as you are immersed.

Some believe that only a certain kind of water should be used for a valid baptism.

Some faith groups insist that only male clergy persons can properly baptize someone.

Almost every one insists that the act of baptizing another always been done by "clergy".

Etcetera! Ad Infinitum!

In the United Methodist Church we have been revisiting what we believe about Infant baptism and re-baptism. Some insist that baptism is only valid as a "believer's baptism" when the baptized is old enough to make a faith decision on their own - - after a confirmation class, etc. We insist that once baptized - - always baptized, whether we remember it or not. We insist that we will not re-baptize folks no matter how hard they plea or what it means in their faith journey. Some folks get all wrought up over these issues and get red in the face when they discuss them. Others wonder what the "fuss" is all about.

Beloved, is that what Jesus died on a cross for!?

HOLY COMMUNION

We all know this story. Out of the Jewish sader meal which is a part of the Passover celebration, Jesus began and instituted this gracious act of love that virtually every Christian group celebrates in some way.

It had such a simple beginning. Taking the elements of the sader, Jesus asked us to use the wine to remember that his blood was shed for all and he asked us to use the unleavened bread to remember that his body was broken and sacrificed for all. Such a simple and loving act of grace. We celebrate communion in the church today to help us to remember God's amazing grace to us.

As with baptism, the church has taken this simple meal of remembrance that Jesus shared with those he loved just before he died and - - have virtually turned in into what I could only term as a - - grace barrier!

Let me explain - -

Some insist that only fermented wine is proper - - others only unleavened bread.

Some insist that only their communion is the proper one and all others are an abomination and sacrilegious.

Some insist that it is only properly served by someone laying something on your tongue and you sipping juice out of a common chalice.

Some insist that it is only properly served by serving the juice in small communion cups.

Some insist that it is only proper to take a piece of bread and dip it into a common cup (some insist that this is an abomination).

Some insist that only baptized members of their church can participate in communion.

Some insist that it be received only on the first Sunday of each month, others insist it must be received every Sunday, while others never offer Holy Communion.

Some insist in believing that we are literally drinking the blood of Christ and eating of his body. (No wonder Caesar's folks thought we were cannibals!)

Some insist that you have come to an altar to receive the elements, while others insist that you must receive them in the pews.

Some insist that only those without sin are worthy to participate.

Some insist that only those ordained be allowed to serve the elements.

Some insist that you wear gloves, and in this day of disease fear that you wash with a disinfectant before touching the elements. The most sanitary insist on using surgical gloves.

Oh, the list could go on, but I believe you get the idea.

In the United Methodist Church we have very strict rules on who can consecrate and serve communion. Oh we have found a way for others to serve it - - if it is first prayed over and consecrated by a "properly credentialed person." We have really jumped through some unusual

hoops to get around this grace barrier. I was on a retreat once of all lay folks and we had to have the preacher pray over the elements three days before the event and the refrigerate them because he was going out of town. Many times at lay events we have had to "recruit a properly credentialed preacher" just to have communion.

We have faithful local pastors serving congregations who cannot, because of their lack of credentialing, present this grace of love to their congregations. They have to wait until a person of the right pedigree shows up and takes over.

Good apostolic succession also helps to validate the credentials of the consecrator. There are some clergy in our midst who insist that lay folks are not worthy to serve the elements - - untrained as they are.

Our General Board of Discipleship is going to lead the church on a four-year study of this sacrament as we practice it in the United Methodist Church.

I sure hope that the fresh winds of God's Holy Spirit can blow through our cobwebby rituals and free up this grace of God from being the "church's property" and return it to the people as a freely given gift of love - - love from a cross!

Let it be so!

A Jim Lane Commentary
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