

A CHANCE TO WASH OUR HEARTS – WITH JESUS

Deacon Colleen Spaeth – Grace Church in Haddonfield – January 11, 2004

Oh, Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, your servants listen. Amen.

I love John the Baptist! If there's one person I could be in the Bible, and I could cross the female/male line – it would be John. John reminds me of somebody I probably danced with at Woodstock. My vision of him is this long unkept hair hippie, clothes that are hanging off this skinny frame, sandals, tanned skin with deep lines, serious guy.

He was his own person, this John the Baptist. He wasn't attached to one place, just one mission, a mission of repentance for those who listened, some day the Messiah would come and this special gift from God would change the path of the world forever.

Meanwhile, till that happened John was holding down the fort, being his own faithful prophet, baptizing in the name of the Lord. He must have been somewhat popular because some folks asked him if he was the guy there were all waiting for.

But John, and excuse this pun, because we know what happens to him later, at least for now he had his head on straight. He knew who he was, and much more than that, he knew who he wasn't. There ends my Woodstock comparison, none of us at Woodstock knew who we were.

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So here finally on this day we hear that Jesus comes. His adult ministry has begun, and he seeks to be baptized. John couldn't be more surprised, in fact he really tries to switch places with Jesus, he tries to turn the reigns over to the boss, maybe looking for a little well deserved vacation now that the real mccoys has surfaced.

But it is Jesus who dives into the Jordan and is cleansed by the waters, and then receives his name and blessing from the Holy Spirit. It is all a cool picture, a crowd along the river bank, the water, the immersing of the young Jesus, thunder, the sky opens up, and the dove, sign of the Holy Spirit, the platform from which Jesus is sent into the world to begin his ministry.

I like the whole presence of the water. To me water symbolizes peace and tranquility. Walking along the beach at sunrise, it's when I have been the most peaceful in my life. The water has rinsed the beach during the night and all signs of others have been wiped away. No footprints from yesterday, a new beach, new gifts.

Now Jesus didn't have to come there that day to get baptized did he?

So why did he come, and what was meant for us to take from this story?

I wonder if it wasn't our wonderful abundant loving God's way of saying, here you go – this one's for you – what are you going to do with it?

Frederick Buechner, in his book "Wishful Thinking", says, "Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. Dunking is a better symbol, however. Going under symbolizes the end of every thing about your life that is less than human.

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Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again.

That's what baptism can be – a new start, a cleansing away of what was, and a fresh start. Of course, when we have a new baby among us, it is with joy that we witness and participate in the naming of that baby, and we join in as witnesses and answer WE WILL when asked if we will support these persons in their life in Christ. Then we join with those who are committing themselves to Christ and renew our own baptismal covenant.

The prayers of the Baptismal Liturgy are so thick and meaty. The newly named is sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Baptism, like our faith, is not a spectator event. There is a reason it is included in our Sunday worship – it is not just something happening to the baby in white and the godparents and parents.

The act of this baptism, this new family among us, gives us new relatives, a connection – we are now family. I wonder if we really know that, and act as if we believe it?

Who are we? Do we remember that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit? Do we live as if we believe it?

Do we really renounce Satan and all sinful forces? Do we really renounce all sinful desires and take us away from the love of God? Do we turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior?

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We just renewed our Baptismal Covenant together – did we really mean it?

Let's look at what we just said – we believe in God the Father, the Holy Spirit, we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God, we will seek and serve Christ in all persons – how do we do that, what does that look like?

I had lunch recently with an old friend. She was by all appearances doing very well in her life. She just completed her masters, she juggles the demands of family and work seemingly well, her car is new, she can buy a new outfit if she wants to without looking at the price tag, at Christmas time she had invitations to all the important social events – a person to be envied by most accounts. Except one – she wasn't content. Happy maybe, but missing from her life was a sense of contentment with all she had achieved and succeeded in. I asked her where God was in all of her life, how was her prayer life. She told me that she felt distant from God. I have an old friend from St. Barts who when I would say I felt distant from God, would ask me in his hyfalutin know-it-all – I can't stand-it-when-I'm right-tone-of-voice, "Who do you think moved"?

I hated when he said that to me. I hated it because he was right. And it was a simple truth – I had moved away from God, and I was hoping God would notice and move closer to me – without any effort on my part.

The sacrament of Baptism is God's reaching out to me, and to you.

I wonder if the beginning of the Gospel reading isn't still true, "as the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts..."

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Here we sit this Sunday morning, and if we will admit it, we come here because of an expectation, a questioning in our hearts. And if we stop, listen, and look – we can feel the Holy Spirit – we can own this special gift that says,

_____, you are my son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

We can wash our hearts over and over again - with Jesus

s.