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Christ has no body now but yours  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
January 9 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:14-17 and Luke 3:15-17 21-22

How time flies. A week or so ago we were welcoming baby Jesus into our midst. And this week we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. And Jesus was probably about 30 years old when he was baptized. So we have covered a lot of ground in the last couple of weeks. I hope we didn't miss anything important!

Today should be easy at least. Baptism is the one sacrament that all Christian groups share in common so it can't be that complicated. And besides, what could be simpler. You have water. You have a person. Boom. Done.

I hope that everyone here today knows that isn't quite that simple. I hope that each of us has experienced a variety of Christian traditions ourselves. And that we know that baptism isn't quite that straightforward because baptism practices vary between churches. Here are some questions around baptism that you might have. Particularly if you've seen baptisms from churches with different traditions:

Q: What does baptism mean:

A: It means you become part of the Christian community, or that you become Christian. It generally also means you become a member of the congregation where you are baptized. I think all Christian communities pretty much agree on this.

Q: Do you have to use water?

A: Absolutely. Unless I'm mistaken, every single Christian tradition requires water for baptism. Of course in most traditions, in an "emergency", exceptions can be made. In an emergency, non-authorized people can perform a baptism. They can use the wrong words and the wrong liquid, or in fact no liquid at all. In an emergency, the best intention of a

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baptism counts. As long as the person did it with honest intentions and they inform their minister/priest as soon as they can.

Q: Do we need special/particular water?

A: Here, we start to see differences of opinion. Some churches use holy water. Some churches use holy water with oil added to it. Some churches use water from the Jordan River (or at least add a few drops). Some churches use tap water, but also use oil to anoint the person being baptized. Here at Sydenham-Heritage, the source of the water is very important. At least since I've been here. It is vitally important that we use regular tap water in honour of the fact that the water symbolizes the spirit. The spirit is important. The water is not. The United Church of Canada usually discourages any practices around baptism that evoke superstitious thinking. And my approach is that baptism is a very special sacrament. Therefore, I resist any efforts to make it "more special". I figure if baptism isn't special enough already ... then we don't know what we are doing. Oh - and the water should be lukewarm, but that is just for comfort - for the minister and the recipient.

~~~ a short digression ~~~

[image: timeout]

The question of whether or not we need special water for baptism is actually very old. The importance - theologically - is this. To what extent do we practice baptism as a symbolic action, leaving room for the spirit to do its own work? And to what extent do we practice baptism as if it is actually magic that we control? As if there is actual power in my fingers and that baptism is something we control ourselves. This actually came up in our reading today from Acts 8. Except that the authors of the lectionary cut out the really good bits.

Reading from a bit from ahead of what we read earlier. Now a certain man named

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Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, ‘This man is the power of God that is called Great.’ And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, Simon stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place. (Acts 8:9-13).

And then, from immediately after our earlier reading. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered the disciples money, saying, ‘Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to Simon, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! You have no part or share in this, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and the chains of wickedness. (Acts 8:18-23).

Simon (not the disciple Simon) was already a well-recognized local magician. And he realized he could make a lot of money baptizing people. So he offered to pay the disciples to teach Simon the trick. But Peter said to Simon, this is not a magic trick. And it’s nothing that people should pay for anyway. But the idea that baptism is really magic is a hard idea to break. I have found that people who are not very religious at all sometimes want their children baptized for superstitious reasons. I have spoken with parents who say, “We don’t believe in God or anything, but can you please baptize our child just in case?” And I say, “in case of what?”. And they answer, “in case hell is real”. And I say, “Oh, hell is real all right, and you don’t have to die to be there.” There are people still who think a splash of water - without any associated change of heart - makes a difference to God. But that is a notion of a very small God indeed.

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Q: What do you have to do with the water?

A: Here's where it really gets interesting.

[image: immersion]

Some churches practice “full-body immersion”, meaning that the person is completely submerged in a large bathtub, or a body of water.

[image: dumping]

Some churches only ask you to completely soak your head. If you take a look at the size of our font you will know that we “sprinkle” water here, usually making 3 passes, one for God, one for Jesus, and one for the spirit.

[image: super soaker]

But I am being completely serious when I tell you that I will be more than happy to perform a baptism in the Grand River if the occasion should arise. Oh - and there is one other thing we have to do with the water here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. We have to pour it. And while we pour it, we listen/feel for the flow of the spirit.

Q: Should babies be baptized?

A: Some churches practice “believer’s baptism”. They do not baptize infants, because they cannot speak for themselves.

[image: baby in kettle]

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Many churches baptize infants, with the understanding that the child's parents will raise them with Christian ideals. In the United Church of Canada we usually baptize anyone who asks, following the belief that baptism is an act of the spirit. Therefore it is not ours to control. When we baptize infants, the parents are asked to make a declaration of their own faith. When the children grow up, at around grade 9 they attend confirmation classes and then have the option of being confirmed. We call it confirmation (not re-baptism) because the youth are invited to "confirm" the faith statements that their parents made on their behalf earlier.

[image: sprinkling]

I have done a number of baptisms as a minister. And I can tell you I really prefer to baptize adults, because with adults we usually have very meaningful conversations about faith prior to the baptism event. But of course I follow United Church tradition and know that it is not my baptism.

Q: Do you need to use special words?

A: Yes. The only acceptable words are for the cleric to say, "I baptize you in the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit". The only permitted variation is to use "holy ghost" instead of "holy spirit". The words are fixed because there is only 1 baptism. The Roman Catholic Church would accept a baptism done in this church because those exact words were spoken. There was a time in the United Church when ministers experimented with different words. The word "father" is no longer a good substitute for the word "God" in many churches, including this one. However, baptism is not ours, it belongs to the global Christian community. So when I baptize I only use the accepted words. Again, it's not our baptism.

Q: Can you be baptized more than once?

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A: In general, no, because the spirit has already done its work. Some churches do not do confirmation. If a person is baptized as a baby, they are re-baptized when they are older, this time letting the person speak for themselves. Nothing in the Bible prevents re-baptism. In the United Church we do not generally re-baptize anyone because we choose instead to respect their first baptism, even if they come from a different branch of Christianity. I did knowingly re-baptize someone once actually. And the reason was not exactly theological. It was administrative. The person needed proof of baptism in order to get married in a Catholic Church and just could not get a copy of the record of their baptism from their former United Church congregation. What I found fascinating was the person preferred to be re-baptized in the United Church instead of being baptized into the Catholic Church. And I had no problem respecting that wish.

Q: Who did Jesus baptize himself?

A: Nobody. Jesus left the actual task of baptizing others to his disciples. Just like today, really.

Q: Did Jesus “institute” baptism?

A: According to church tradition, Jesus “instituted” baptism. To institute means to start or cause a system, or a rule, to exist. The idea is that even though Jesus didn’t baptize anyone, he commanded it to be done.

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The 4 gospels give us 4 accounts of the life of Jesus. In 3 of the gospels, after Jesus was resurrected, he spent time with the disciples, until a later time when he headed to heaven. This gave Jesus the opportunity to pass on some final instructions. We call

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these final instructions “the great commission”. Jesus gives a commission to the disciples in Matthew, Luke, and John. In Luke (and in Acts, which was written by the same author) Jesus states that all people will be called on to undergo a change of heart for the forgiveness of sins. Luke then outlines the geographic expansion of this mission from Jerusalem. To all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That plan is then carried out in the book of Acts. In Matthew the great commission is a call to make disciples of all people, to baptize, and to teach. And in John, Jesus bestows the holy spirit on the disciples and confirms their authority to forgive - and to bind - sins.

In the words of the Jesus Seminar Scholars, “These commissions have little in common [with each other], which indicates that they have been created by the individual evangelists to express their conception of the future of the Jesus movement. As a consequence, they cannot be traced back to Jesus. ... Jesus probably had no idea of launching a world mission and certainly was not an institution builder.”<sup>1</sup> But however it came to be, baptism is the recognized sign/symbol of joining a/the Christian community.

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Q: What questions does anyone else have about baptism?

I said earlier that baptism is the mechanism we use to allow people to join the Christian community. What exactly does that mean? In practical terms, if you are baptized in this congregation, you become a member of this congregation. But it’s really more than that. Joining the Christian community is about adopting a Christian faith, and faith not just about what we believe. Faith is also about how we live our lives. Jesus spent his ministry engaging with people, healing, and teaching. And we are all called - through our baptism - to do the same. We are called to heal the wounded world. To see as Christ would see. To journey with the poor. To give back to those in need. You don’t need to be baptized to do that. You don’t even need to be Christian. But baptism is the Christian call to do just that.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Five Gospels*, pg 270.

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Embrace your own baptism. Embrace your own call to be “as Christ would be” in our world today. Remember - Christ has no body now but yours. Baptism is not magic. Baptism is your ticket to be and to become the body of Christ today.

Fortunately, we do not do this alone. We have the spirit. But we also have each other. For help, for support, for simple basic friendship. We have each other. We have enough.

And if you accept your baptism, and the reality that Christ has no body now but ours, ... how would Brantford know that? Is the body of Christ sleeping today? Is the body of Christ isolating today? Or is the body of Christ acting, caring, and loving in our own community. What does it mean to be the body of Christ in Brantford in 2022?

As we roll into a new year, let’s explore that question together all year long.

*Amen.*