
Christ has no body now but yours
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 12, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 8:9-24 and Luke 3:15-22

How time flies. It seems like only 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 cannot 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 different Christian traditions. And we know that baptism isn't quite that straightforward because baptism means somewhat different things in different churches. Here are some questions around baptism that you might have. Particularly if you have seen baptisms from churches with different traditions:

Q: What does baptism mean:

A: When you are baptized, it means 2 things. For one thing, it means that you become part of the global Christian community. Or in plain language, you become Christian. Nobody is born Christian, and the process to become a Christian is baptism. I think most Christian communities pretty much agree on this. There are a number of exceptions - churches who believe that only their own members are actually Christian. Those churches do not believe there is any Christian community outside their own denomination. But I think the norm is to believe that baptism welcomes you into the global Christian community.

And the second thing is that being baptized usually also makes you a member of the congregation in which you are baptized. That is why if you want to be baptized in this congregation it must first be approved by our board - because it affects our membership. I

have the authority of the church to perform a baptism, but I am not authorized to add members to this congregation.

Q: Do we have to use water?

A: Absolutely. Except when we don't. 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 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 Chapel in the Park United Church, 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. In general, the United Church of Canada discourages any practices around baptism that evoke superstitious thinking. And my own 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 and very important. 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

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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. The lectionary gave us a reading from Acts 8 this morning. But they cut out the really good bits, so I added them back in. Thanks to Rowena for reading it all.

Have you ever heard that reading about Simon before? Simon (not the disciple Simon) was a well-recognized local magician. And he realized he could make a lot of money baptizing people. So Simon offered to pay the disciples to teach him the trick to baptism. 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 for some people. 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 get there." There are people still who think a splash of water - without any change of heart - makes a difference to God.

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

A: Here's where it really gets interesting. And for practical reasons it depends on whether the person being baptized is an adult or an infant.

[image: immersion]

Some churches practice "full-body immersion", meaning that the person is completely submerged in a large bathtub, or a body of water. Churches who practice this form of baptism believe that immersion is what John did to Jesus, and therefore, that our own baptisms should use immersion.

[image: dumping]

Some churches only ask you to completely soak your head.

[image: sprinkling]

If you take a look at the size of our font you can expect that we "sprinkle" water

here, usually making 3 passes, one for God, one for Jesus, and one for the spirit.

[image: super soaker]

I'm sure that churches have used a variety of ways to distribute water during baptism. Oh - and there is one other thing we have to do with the water here at Chapel in the Park United Church. We have to pour it into the font during the service. And while we pour it, we listen/feel for the flow of the spirit. The flow of the water represents the flow of the spirit. So we need to pour it into the font during the service.

[image: aspersion 1]

During the pandemic, when people were not really allowed to gather together, I did a baptism in my backyard using a very old and traditional method called "Aspersion". That's where the minister takes a branch from a tree - preferably with foliage, soaks it in the baptismal waters, and flings it in the general direction of the recipient.

[image: aspersion 2]

[image: aspersion 3]

And for maximum authenticity I did actually cut a branch off a nearby tree.

Q: Should babies be baptized?

A: Some churches practice "believer's baptism". They do not baptize infants, because babies cannot speak for themselves. Those churches believe that you should not be baptized until you can understand it.

[image: baby in kettle]

Many churches baptize infants, with the understanding that the child's parents will raise them with Christian values. 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 can attend confirmation classes and then have the option of being confirmed. We call it confirmation because the youth are invited to "confirm" the statements of faith that their parents made on their behalf earlier.

Q: Do you need to use special words?

A: Yes. The only acceptable words are for the minister to say are, “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 actually. Many people - including me - do not see God as male. And so “God the father” is not really a helpful term. I knew a minister once who said, “God the parent” or something like that. But I won’t do that myself. Baptism belongs to the global Christian community. So when I baptize I only use the accepted words. Again, it's not our baptism.

One common thing you see in United Church baptisms is that following the official words, other words are added that express more diverse image of the character of God.

Q: Can you be baptized more than once?

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 a person’s first baptism, even if they come from a different tradition 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 they just could not get a copy of the record of their baptism from their former United Church congregation which had closed. And I had no problem respecting that wish.

Q: Who did Jesus baptize?

A: Nobody. Jesus never baptized anyone. 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 did not baptize anyone, he commanded it to be done.

~~~ a short digression ~~~

[image: timeout]

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. Part of these instructions are what we call “the great commission”. Jesus gives a commission to the disciples in Matthew, Luke, and John. (But not in Mark.) 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> So no, Jesus did not institute baptism. But however it came to be, baptism is the recognized sign/symbol of joining a/the Christian community.

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¹ *The Five Gospels*, pg 270.

Q: Does baptism change the person who is baptized?

A: There are two schools of thought on this. One says, “yes”, and one says, “no”.

In the “yes” camp are people who believe that unless you are baptized, you cannot go to heaven. That thinking was very popular in our past, which is why we even have emergency baptisms. It also explains the non-religious parents who want their children to be baptized.

But in the United Church of Canada, we lean towards the “no” side. My fingers are not actually magic after all. A person does not magically change just because they are baptized.

I think of it this way. Imagine that you are the bride or groom at a wedding. Does the ritual act of a wedding automatically make you a more loving person? No. Does the ritual act of a wedding in itself make you more sensitive to the needs of your spouse? No. A wedding - in itself - does not actually change a person. And neither does a baptism.

I think of baptism more like getting your driver’s license.

When you get your driver’s license, you are now allowed to drive. But you still need to learn a lot before you become a good driver. You need to take advice from a lot of people and actually practice before you will become a good driver.

And with baptism, after you are baptized, you are now a Christian. But you need to take advice from a lot of people and actually practice before you will be a good Christian.

Baptism - like a driver’s license - is your ticket to keep learning - in community - about love and the kingdom of God in our midst.

Joining a 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 call to Christians to do just that.

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 part of the body of Christ today.

[image: Christ has no body now but yours]

In a moment you will realize that I stole the words for the ending of this reflection from the hymn we are about to sing called, “Christ Has No Body Now But Yours”. But I want to just change one word. The song says, “Christ has no body now but yours”.

[image: Christ has no body now but yours]

But I say, “Christ has no body now but ours”, because we are all in this together. We do not do this alone. We have the spirit. But we also have each other. For help, for support, for simple basic caring and friendship. We have the spirit. We have each other. We have enough.

So if you accept your baptism, and the reality that Christ has no body now but ours, ... how would our communities know that? Is the body of Christ sleeping today? Or is the body of Christ acting, caring, and loving in our own communities. What does it mean to be the body of Christ in 2025?

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