

Immersion experiences

Matthew 3:1-17

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[Quoting the hymn that preceded the sermon:]

Many gifts, one Spirit, one love known in many ways.
In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise
one Giver, one Word, one Spirit, one God
known in many ways...

This afternoon I head off to Hartford, Connecticut, for an 8-day seminar on “Building Abrahamic Partnerships.” It will be a gathering of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, learning about each others’ traditions and scriptures and also about the common misconceptions we hold about each other’s faith. I deeply appreciate that this congregation understands the importance of such work in building friendship and understanding across boundaries of religious and cultural difference.

These three great religions—three among the relative few that have truly shaped the world we live in—share not only a genealogical heritage extending back to Abraham (though by way of different women), but also a debt of practices, commitments, and ideas that bounce off each other like echoes in a canyon. Today’s scripture reading points to at least three—belief in one God, creator of heaven and earth; the essential of doing justice, or bearing good fruits; and a practice of ritual washing.

I for one have been more familiar with the Muslim practice of washing before daily prayers than I have of Jewish ritual cleansing. I was aware of the *mikveh* and the ritual washing many observant Jewish women around the world do after their periods, though I don’t know much about it. But I only recently learned about some of the other kinds of ritual cleansing in Jewish tradition. Some Christian scholars say that John the Baptist was a grand initiator, that the baptism in the Jordan people came to him for was something new in Judaism. Maybe so. But even if it was, to whatever extent it was, it built on practices and understandings grounded in the scriptures that preceded him.¹

Grammatically, a *mikveh* is really any gathering of waters, and in the hierarchy of waters for ritual cleansing, running water such as a stream or river is the highest and most preferred. So John didn’t simply choose the Jordan as something new or simply handy, or even just to be contrary. *Living water* is the scriptural term that describes a stream or river. No less fanciful than “running” water, I suppose, but so much more evocative—and we might remember that Jesus is said to have referred to himself as “living water,” according to other stories in the gospels. Baptism by immersion was practiced with people who converted to Judaism,² a ritual cleansing of the past as

¹ The primary source of what follows is “The Jewish Background of Christian Baptism” by Ron Moseley, published in the *Seasons of the Spirit* curriculum guide. It speaks of practices in rabbinic Judaism, which was developing in the Pharisaic movement of Jesus’ day. The extent to which some of these practices were “standard” in Jesus’ time is unclear, to me at least, but the parallels are suggestive.

² Just to be clear: this was not the case for Jesus, who was already a Jew.

one moved into a new state of being. But people also immersed themselves before entering the Temple, and rabbis self-baptized as they entered that new stage of their lives as teachers. Jesus, you'll remember, was called *rabbi* by some of his followers and interlocutors.

John is said to have baptized people to wash their sins away. More on John's agency in all of this in a moment, but it's better to think of baptism as something that marks a fresh start, a new beginning. As some might say, of being *born* again. (You'll note that I didn't say "born *again*," which distorts and limits the meaning.) A baptism, a ritual cleansing, is oriented more toward what follows than what went before.

Jewish ritual cleansing of this type was (and is) done by oneself—and in the presence of someone else. Our translations of the story of Jesus' baptism say he was baptized "by John." I've always pictured John laying his hands on Jesus and submerging him into the waters, perhaps like modern-day Baptists and Pentecostals do as they push the initiate backwards into the water and then draw them up out of it again. Every depiction of Jesus' baptism that I've ever seen—in movies, in paintings, in Bible illustrations—shows something like that. But apparently in a traditional Jewish baptism, it was important that nothing interfere with water coming into contact with any part of the body, so no one else touched the person as she or he baptized themselves. The person coming for baptism would strip naked (again, so clothing wouldn't prevent the water from coming into contact with the skin), stand in the water, hold their hands out, and dip themselves into the water and rise from it three times. (Three times because the word *mikveh* appears three times in the Torah.) Certain words would be said as the person committed themselves to what was ahead, and the act was to be witnessed. In this way, people were said to be baptized "in the name of" whoever the witness was. Surely the witness was important. If you were dedicating yourself to a new way of living, or were opening yourself to God in a new way, you didn't do it in the presence of just anybody. When we ask people to have a special place in our rituals, we choose our witnesses with care. In other parts of the newer testament we read that people were baptized in the name of John, or Paul, or someone else. But that might have meant that Paul or John was their chosen witness, the one to whom people went when they wanted to dedicate themselves to a new and dawning stage in their lives. I also wonder if the Christian baptismal formula of being baptized "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" bears an echo of this practice, that God in three persons bears witness to the action by which a person seeks a new way of being in the world.

Now the lectionary—the suggested readings for the day—included only part of what I asked Russ to read. Just the part about John baptizing Jesus and the dove descending. But we've included the part of the story that precedes it, setting the scene before Jesus arrives. It makes a more complete story, but it also includes what I think is an essential part that we don't get with just the baptism—John's insistence on bearing good fruit. His language is pretty harsh—calling people a "brood of vipers," using the images of chopping at the roots of a tree with an axe, and unquenchable fire—but his point is that words and ritual are not enough and people are not "born again" if they don't move into a new way of being in the world, a way marked by justice and compassion. It's not enough just to talk the talk (or to take the dip, for that matter).

The other day I had coffee with a woman who's preparing for ordained ministry. (And no, this wasn't Jennie.) She spoke quite easily of her hope of making theologians of members of her congregation. A generation of seminarians has been educated into this kind of goal, and there's

potentially a lot of good in that. But I must say that I'm wary of how glibly some people speak of it.

Now I wouldn't have spent so much time this morning on a rather educational pursuit, talking about baptism and Jewish ritual cleansing, if I didn't think it important (or at least potentially interesting). And theology lies behind every prayer and practice in the order of worship. There's also theology—not always good theology—in almost every hymn. What's important is to be able to distinguish between good theology and bad. In a way this heightens the importance of a congregation being a community of theologians. But I don't think it always works that way, so I'm wary of the simple goal of making theologians of us all.

For one thing, of course, not everybody wants to be a theologian! Some are just not so inclined, and more power to you. Because a bad theology is worse than no theology at all. I'm all for encouraging a helpful theology and for encouraging theological dialogue (or trialogue!) But there's a problem if in becoming a theologian, somebody starts to read God into everything.

I'm very wary of reading God into the results of a political primary, for example, though some do in our time of heightened theologizing. I'm wary of reading God's hand into the collapse of a bridge, or the death of one who was taken from us too soon. For centuries (including this one) people have rushed to war in the theological assurance that God was on their side. Mark Twain had biting words to say about that, and maybe nobody has said it better. Google his "War Prayer" sometime, and make sure you read the unabridged version.

I'm confident that the woman I was talking with at coffee the other day wasn't intending to make of her congregation people who see God's will in every event. I'm sure she was talking about making *discerning* theologians of her congregation, but *discernment* is what should get the emphasis.

You've no doubt noticed that some people begin their sermons by offering a prayer. And you may have noticed that I don't. Perhaps I should. It's a good practice. But don't misunderstand what you see and hear (or don't see and don't hear). For me, my own prayer is still something quite private. Just as many Muslims begin any new effort with the Bismillah (saying, in Arabic, in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Caring), every time I call up the sermon-writing template on my computer, there's a passage from Ecclesiastes at the top of the page:

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God;
to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools;
for they do not know that they are doing evil.
Be not rash with your mouth,
nor let your heart be hasty to offer a word before God,
for God is in heaven, and you on earth;
therefore, let your words be few.*

— Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 RSV

One thing that I deeply appreciate about the United Church of Christ is its heritage of emphasizing the fruits of our labors, and often more than the words of any creed. How we live together says more—and does more—than the words we profess. This too will help to guide me

in my participation in the seminar in Hartford, just as for many among us, the way we live trumps whatever theology we might profess. And part of what we owe each other in our friendships and discussions is an appreciation of the histories and practices we hold in common.

Sometimes words get in the way.

Sometimes it's best to imagine your way into an undescribed moment in Jesus' baptism. Being under the water, where the sound is muffled and fades away. The thrumming silence of being submerged and then the unfiltered sound upon emerging—just noise at first and then the mind pushes it aside and sees, only sees, light and shapes and colors that take a moment to coalesce into forms and figures and movement. What takes our attention first as we are baptized into a new epiphany is not words, but motion.