

## BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

First Unitarian Church

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Those of you who have seen recent episodes of the Public Television program *Downton Abbey* know that the character Anna has been raped. When talking to her only confidant, an older woman, she explains why she has been pulling away from her husband. She says she feels sullied, dirty, compared to her him. She feels guilty, as victims sometimes do, and then says of her husband, "He is without fault and that's the point. I'm not good enough for him. Not now."

There are times we can feel spiritually or mentally broken, unworthy, unclean, or unacceptable. I have talked with men who have gone through war, and returned feeling changed in troubling ways; marked by war. I have spoken with parents who have failed to do something for their child and felt suddenly unworthy, unfit as a person. I have known people of all sorts, gay and straight, who struggled with the sense of judgment against their inborn sexuality.

The ritual, in the Christian faith, that evokes the idea of being washed cleaned of sin and redeemed is Baptism. However, over the centuries there have been many different opinions about what Baptism really means, and even how it should be done. Usually water is involved, but should it be sprinkled, or poured, or should the person being baptized be immersed in the water? Sometimes combinations of these modes are used, such as sprinkling in the head and pouring over the hands. The Baptist denomination is named primarily for their insistence on adult, or "believer's," baptism, but they are also known for their preference to immerse people in water. I heard once of a Baptist Minister who was given a gift of special Christianized waders to help him keep dry while Baptizing others. They had a cross, and Jesus' words from Matthew 28:19, stitched onto the rubberized fabric. A nearby Methodist church heard of this gift and, thinking it was a lovely gesture of honor, they immediately went out and got their minister a pair of Christianized rubber gloves. (In case you did not get it, this is a slight joke about those who only sprinkle water during baptism). When discussing Christian theology I tend to draw on the tradition of those who go one step further and emphasize the idea of Baptism of the Spirit. Rituals are important, they can make more concrete

the beliefs we hold, they can even hold great power, but ultimately it is not the ritual but the spirit in the ceremony which matters most.

By Spirit I don't mean an incorporeal being but rather a gestalt, or fusion, of thought and feeling, experience and meaning that shapes our actions. My thinking about this became focused recently when a young man, JD Moore asked, through his mentor, to be baptized. I had to think about what it might mean for me to baptize someone and if that was even a good thing to do. I also had to find out something of what it meant to him. As we talked it became clear that being baptized had to do with feeling right with God. I asked him if there was something he had done that he felt God needed to forgive. He said 'no,' but he was very aware of the finality of death. His best friend had been recently murdered, others around him had been shot to death, even an uncle of his had died years ago when the uncle was the same age as JD was now, only sixteen years old. Facing death he wanted to know that his soul was right with God. He also admitted, with my prompting, that if he did not die he wanted his living to be right from there on out. I baptized JD according to his understanding and it was a joyful experience. We all should explore the theology of baptism because it can help reveal something about our own sense of rightness, of purity and of community. The simple fact is that even among Christian there are many different understandings of what it means and exactly how it works.

For example, once a little girl, named Betsy, heard about Baptism in Sunday school. In the car on the way home she said, "I'm gonna' get baptized and made all clean." Her mother, wanting to be sure her daughter understood the theology, asked, "Honey, how does Baptism work?" "Well," Betsy began carefully, "it isn't the water that makes you clean..." she paused, thinking, and her mother smiled knowing that her daughter understood something of the complexity, until Betsy said, "... it's the soap that does it."

Because the subject can elicit many opinions, in this sermon I will summarize thinking about baptism around three theological issues; identity, inheritance, and purity. I will look at the basic Christian ideas concerning these issues and then look at how Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have thought about such things.

After the accident, at my sister's funeral,  
My father said, *But she wasn't Baptized.*

*Dad,* I said—

He looked at my face  
and waded in  
to my nineteen year old sister—  
our little rill engulfed by a river.

*God will make it alright,* dad said  
and believed it, at least for me.

You could say my father was awash  
in love  
and that saved him.

So may it be for all of us, that we live affirming a universal love that, as Reverend Duke Gray put it: *overcomes all differences, heals all wounds, puts to flight all fears, and reconciles all who are separated.* In every life may there be a baptism of the spirit. This I hope, that people like the character Anna, or the boy JD, and even that you and I and all who long for such a thing, may we all be awash in the spirit of healing, and purifying love.

The most basic idea about baptism is that it is essential for taking on a Christian identity. If a person has chosen to "follow Jesus" and join the community of Christians they are baptized to mark that transition. Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, was "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Throughout the centuries Unitarians and Universalists also practiced baptism as a mark of joining the faith. However, this was less rigidly an exclusive identity as in other denominations. To emphasize this point some Unitarians noted that Jesus did not get baptized in the river Jordan in order to become a Christian, but to claim something else. Over the last hundred years this practice has diminished as most people came to this church from other Christian faiths, pre-baptized as it were, but also because we began to seek more and more the universality of religious truth. Thus there are many of us today who aren't exactly Christian: Jewish UUs or Pagan UUs, persons who follow an atheist, or even Buddhist flavored form of this faith.

More to the point, we have long affirmed the goodness of people as far more important than their claimed identity. I once knew a Unitarian Universalist who had, earlier in her life, been a Baptist. On an evangelism trip to the island of Bali she came to a troubling realization: that the Hindu villagers there had more of the scriptural Fruits of the Spirit, (namely love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,) than did most of the Christian people she had known back home. This inspired her to seek a religious community that was inclusive of all faiths and did not assume its own people were somehow better, or closer to God, than any others. Likewise, many of us have rejected the injustice of God dividing humanity into the saved and damned just by a matter of belief, and found justice here.

What is more, we tend to identify not only with each other but also with all of humanity. We see that we are all connected, "woven into a single garment of destiny" as King put it. And our connections do not end with humankind, but extend out through the "web of being." We are those who claim an inclusive, instead of exclusive, spiritual identity. In this church one of our beloved traditions is Dedication of Children. In that ceremony we welcome children into community and affirm the inherent worth of each person. We assert their place in the human community, and

within this particular congregation. To be a member of this church is to identify with this one particular part of the universal community. It is to say these are the people I will seek truth with, these are the particular people I will affirm and care for, as part of the wider circle of those who seek to live well on this good earth.

Now, the second element of Christian baptism that I hold up today is the idea that one will not only live on earth as a Christian, but will gain the immortal life, become a Child of God, an inheritor of the Kingdom and a bearer of the Holy Spirit. The idea is that baptism confers some spiritual status and power, and the ultimate status is to be one with God in that non-time beyond time, that 'newly remembered dream' invoked in E. E. Cumming's poem 'purer than purest.'

What is the key to this kingdom? To begin, note that there are many places in scripture where Jesus and others make a distinction between mere baptism of water, and baptism of the spirit. For example, earlier we read the story of Philip converting and baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26ff). Just before that story is one set at the house of someone named Cornelius where a number of converts had gathered. (Acts 8:5ff). When the disciples arrived, "they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized [with water] in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." Immediately the people showed a change and healing miracles happened.

The first thing to note about this story is that a simple water baptism is good, but it is not enough. Many people, of those who went beyond Luther and Calvin in calling for Christian reform during the sixteenth century, noted that the baptism of the Spirit was way more important than the external ceremony of water baptism. Just as Jesus had spoken to the woman at the well (John 4: 4-15) about the water of the spirit so too these Christians said what mattered was not the ceremony, but the inward change of heart, the awakening of the mind.

The second part of this story tells that a man named Simeon, who wanted magic power, asked if he too could work miracles in Jesus' name if he gives them enough money. The Apostle Peter denied him, saying "You have no part or share in this ministry, because

your heart is not right before God." The way to inherit the kingdom and power of the Spirit, in this understanding of Christian theology, is not with money nor through outward profession of belief, but through an inner state of mind and heart. More significantly it is through our living, in obeying the commandments of Jesus that the Kingdom, of which he spoke, is incarnated in our lives. As I noted earlier, this state is not limited for Unitarians to only those with a Christian identity.

This sounds pretty good; that the Baptism of the Spirit is a change of mind and heart available to anyone. But sometimes, no matter how much we wish this sort of change, we still feel a block. We feel unworthy, or think clearly about how short we have fallen in our lives from the high ideals we hold and we know we are not worthy. Thus, in all religions, there are rituals of cleansing, ways of helping us feel cleansed and made right again. In ancient Judaism, there were many rituals of cleansing with water, as part of consecrating priests or allowing someone to participate in worship. Some of those rituals endure to today. Likewise, in Hinduism, Islam, Paganism, even in the Comanche culture, there are ritual ablutions with water that are not about dirt on the skin but spirit and soul. Some of my UU colleagues who have encountered the ancient Shinto faith have also engaged in a ritual called *misogi*. In this ritual one chants certain prayers, walks through the woods, puts on a white robe and then stands under the full falling force of a waterfall. I am told it is a powerful ritual of cleansing and purification. Though one might wonder after it is over, "How long does purity last?"

The rituals alone do not change the world but are designed to orient us toward, and help us feel open to, the ultimate state of things; this is one of wholeness and deep peace. In Christian theology it is the universal grace and forgiveness of God, revealed to us through the life, and death, of Jesus. The Apostle Peter in his first letter ties baptism to the sacrifice of Jesus and says (1 Peter 3:21), "...water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God." But again I must emphasize that in our tradition this is not an exclusive salvation which leaves others in the outer darkness.

In researching this sermon I came across a lovely poem that evokes these issues of community, identity, and their possible resolution. The poem is titled "Baptism":