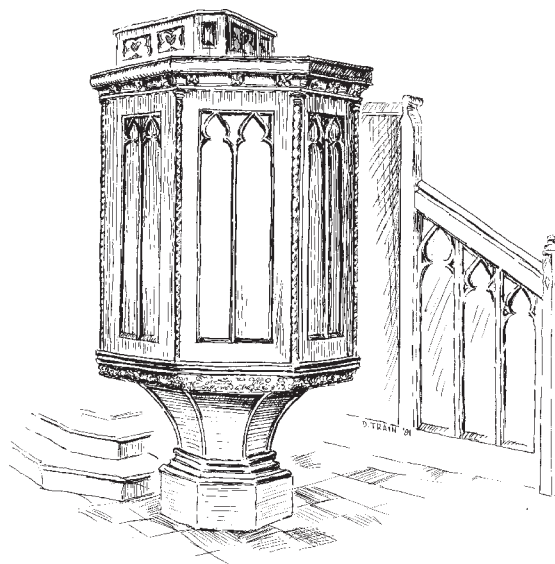


January 11, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Realizing Our Baptism

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 28:16-20

Though I never met him, one of the clergy colleagues I have admired most is an Englishman by the name of Dick Sheppard. Dick Sheppard was a P.K., a preacher's kid, a son of the manse. In fact, his father was Canon-in-Residence to the Queen of England. While Dick was at Oxford, he gave up his whole social background – left college and went to work in the London slums. Finally, he decided that he had to be a parson even though he had always been a doubter both of himself and God. As an Anglican priest he fought the whole pack of English bishops. He said that the only thing that stood between people and Christianity was the Church of England.

In his early thirties he became rector of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields at Trafalgar Square. He worked to get the poor liberated from the rats and squalor. He welcomed them to his church. He made pastoral calls on prostitutes, not to reform them, but just to let them know that someone could accept and love them as the children of God that they were. He upset the well-heeled of his parish because they found their pews occupied by strangers that smelled of alcohol. Strays came now to the church in droves. Sheppard was a pacifist who upset the politicians as they played it safe and sane. He was also an asthmatic who often had to be carried into the pulpit. His daily prayer was, "Give me this day my daily breath."

On the day he died, he got up at four o'clock in the morning to give a pair of strong soft gloves to a man who had been burned in a work-related accident. He preached three times, remembered to send a

birthday bouquet of flowers to a friend, and called on a dying parishioner after the evening service. For two days as his coffin lay in St. Martin's, people lined up around Trafalgar Square in queue: waiters, taxi-drivers, bankers, royalty and prostitutes – and they sat - over 100,000 of them - in the Square until his body was carried off to be buried.

But, did you know that Dick Sheppard died feeling he was a failure because he had accomplished so little of what he wanted to do? He felt the pressure of his baptism. Part of his sense of failure was that he did not want people to think that he did what he did because he was a *parson*, but because he was a *person* – a person fulfilling his baptism, realizing God's call for him to be an honest-to-God human being.

You see, baptism isn't meant to keep us safe or assure our salvation. Baptism is being submerged with our Master into his death, so that we may rise to serve him. By baptism we were buried and drowned "bearing" says Paul, "in our bodies the death of Jesus..."

The work of baptism is:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart.

Martin Luther at his trial before lords and bishops kept saying over and over "...But I've been baptized." "...But I've been baptized." For Luther it meant that because of baptism he was no longer his own. He had to be true to the example of Christ. If Jesus was willing to be damned for the glory of God, never concerned for his own survival, neither can those baptized in him play it safe.

The present trend in so much of church life, I fear, is to think that the gospel promises us safety and produces in its followers a kind of navel-gazing separatism that often becomes a condemning unattractive superiority. We don't cast fire on the earth. We don't startle. It's almost as if we turn outside-in as we chant, "God's in heaven; all's right with my world." Maybe it is, but then there is surely something the matter with our realizing our baptism.

When Jesus asked James and John if they were able to drink his cup and be baptized with his baptism, they glibly replied, "Yes, Lord, we are able." But, they didn't know then the risk involved. It would mean taking a cup of cold water to an enemy. It would mean wearing one's heart on one's sleeve, and getting up at four in the morning to take a pair of strong, soft gloves to a man whose hands had been burned, and all the time feeling like an utter failure. It is not easy to be commissioned to suffer, but only in this way is our baptism to be realized, for it is the way of Christ our Lord, now living in the body of his servant people.

But what good news there is in all of this! For we are baptized not only into the power of Christ's death, we are also raised in the power of his resurrection.

When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he asked the new Christians he met there, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?"

They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

So Paul baptized them in the name of the Triune God and they found that to follow Jesus is not a burden, but a gift. Now they were fortified, enabled, companioned, supported and life for them was lived in a new dimension.

As a young minister, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. It was so radical and "critical" in its study of the gospels that Schweitzer was almost overcome with doubt. But, realizing his baptism, he summed up what Jesus did to haunt him:

He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside; he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word, "Follow me!" And sets us to the tasks he has to fulfill in our time. He commands, and to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, and the sufferings they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.

Friends, as we begin a new year full of challenges and possibilities, I invite you to reaffirm and realize your baptism.