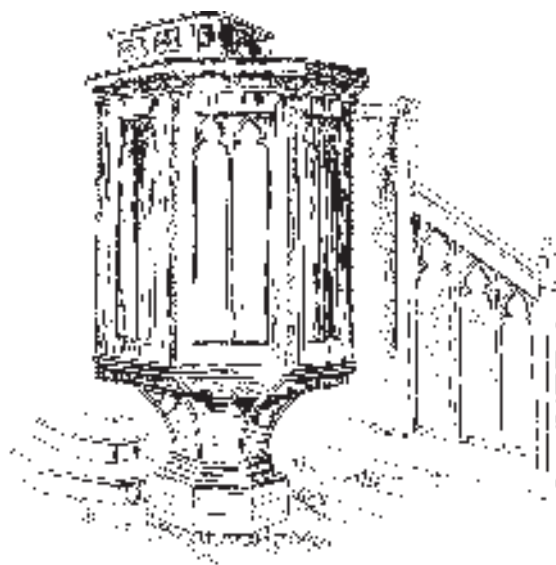


May 10, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

All in the Family
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Acts 2:37-41

The minister of a church of a different denomination contacted the pastor of a large downtown Baptist church and made an unusual request. He had several folks who were about to join his church and preferred to be baptized by immersion rather than sprinkling, the church's normal mode of baptism. The minister requested not only the use of their baptistry, but that the Baptist pastor himself baptize the prospective new members. This posed a dilemma—what if those being baptized weren't born again? Since it was the Baptist's pastor's conviction that only Christians should be baptized, he realized he couldn't with good conscience cooperate with the plan, but he wished to handle his answer with tact so as not to offend the other minister. I understand that he wrote a letter, a masterpiece of grace, in which he included this line: "We don't take in laundry, but we'll be happy to loan you our tub."

Well, we don't have a tub, but, I want to talk this morning about infant baptism. Why do Presbyterians baptize infants? Let me ask that another way: what difference does it make when and how one is baptized—infant or adult sprinkling or immersion? What difference does it really make? The most important issue is that one is baptized. I mean, according to the Book of Acts, from the time of Peter and the First Century church, Christians have believed that baptism is the biblically required sign of incorporation into the Christian community. So why the anxiety on how and when? Silver bowl or big tub—no big deal, right?

Maybe not such a big deal in the 21st century, but it certainly was 484 years ago. On January 21,

1525 some Swiss adult leaders of a new church group—Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz and Balthasar Hubmair—baptized their friend George Blanrock. In March the town council in Zurich declared that *anyone baptized as an adult would be executed without benefit of trial*. Manz was the first victim, followed by Hubmair in 1528 and Blanrock in 1529.

Our reformed ancestors in Zurich executed these men, calling them Anabaptists or “rebaptizers.” The Anabaptists discounted infant baptism and practiced only adult baptism or baptism of believers, modeled after what they held to be a New Testament example from Acts. In so doing, they sparked controversy and evoked a persecution throughout Europe that altered the course of the Reformation. By the early 1530s hundreds of Anabaptists had been drowned, beheaded, or burned.

We sometimes forget that there were three main branches in the Reformation that broke from the Roman Catholic Church. Today’s Lutheran churches trace their lineage, of course, to Martin Luther. Luther’s great emphasis was doctrinal. Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, was his byword.

The Lutherans shied away from advocating social, political, or liturgical reforms, content simply to modify Roman Catholic practices while working within the established ecclesiastical framework. They saw no harm in retaining Catholic liturgy and symbols. Indeed, every practice not specifically prohibited by scripture was acceptable. The crucifix, vestments, paintings, and relics, as well as some features of the Roman Catholic liturgy, were all continued in the Lutheran church.

Today’s Presbyterian and Reformed churches trace their ancestry not to Germany, but to Switzerland and the Reformed movement of Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger. They went further than the Lutherans. They wanted a complete overhaul of all facets of church life. They retained nothing of Catholic practice except those acts specifically **commanded** by scripture. Simple to the point of austerity, their churches were stripped of crucifixes and “Pope-ish decorations” like stained glass, organs, statues, and paintings. Processions, festivals, Saints’ days and other medieval practices were abolished.

Today’s Baptist, Moravian, and the Brethren churches can trace their ancestry back to the third branch of the Reformation—the radical reformists, or the Anabaptists. They took the Reformation one step further than either the Lutherans or the Calvinists. They felt true reform could be found only in total rejection of all post-scriptural church tradition and full **reinstatement** of New Testament doctrine and life style. They wanted to reject any vestiges of their present sixteenth century Roman Catholic church. They wanted to live like the church described in Acts. Only believers in Christ could be baptized. Only those able to respond to God’s love could be baptized. They paid for it with the hatred of not only the Roman Catholics, but the Lutherans and the Presbyterians as well. Many paid with their lives.

Well, we’ve come a long way on this issue. Even Presbyterians baptize adults nowadays. But most of the time, baptism is administered to infants. Why? Why do Presbyterians baptize infants?

Our answer is not the same as it would be if we were Roman Catholics. Catholics baptize infants because they believe the sacrament changes the order of things. When the priest baptizes an infant, the child becomes God’s child. The order of things changes by the initiation of the sacrament—original sin is washed away. Without the benefit of baptism, Roman Catholics believe we are cut off from God. If a child were to die without being baptized, Catholics believe that the child would not go to heaven. Presbyterians don’t believe that.

So why do we Presbyterians baptize infants? Is it baby worship? Is it something nice to do on

Mother's Day? No. We baptize infants as "an outward visible sign of an inward invisible grace." This morning we recognized and celebrated that Elizabeth Anne Stack is a child of God—loved by God before she is even able to respond to God. The emphasis throughout the Presbyterian/Reformed understanding of baptism is on what **God does**, not on what **we do**. Before we loved and chose God, God loved and chose us. Before we decided to become members of God's family, God "adopted" us to belong to it.

Infant baptism declares the sovereign grace and initiative of God. It demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. It proclaims that God loves this child and that God initiates, governs and maintains this community we call the church.

I have been told on good authority that on a spring morning in my dim past, Dr. Carry Wisiker took me in his arms, held me over a silver bowl, sprinkled water over my bald head, called me by name, and told me I was a Christian. Sixty-two springs later, in spite of what I have done and where I have been, that graceful water still fills my shoes; those words still thunder in my brain, and I still answer to that name. And it all came to me as a gift.

Let us pray...

O Lord God, we love because you first loved us. You reach out to us before we even think to reach for you. Thank you for the Sacrament of Baptism which brings us into your family, the church. Amen.

