

The Baptism of the Lord “The Sacrament of Baptism Gift or Choice”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, every so often a parishioner or two will let me know after mass that it is their birthday or a special anniversary for them. I love that because it gives me the opportunity as a pastor to celebrate with them in that moment and perhaps even offer a blessing. This is very cool. However, even more wonderful than this, every so often a parishioner will let me know after mass that it is the anniversary of their baptism. I confess I am really impressed by parishioners who remember the day of their baptism because, from a biblical point of view, is there any other day in our lives more wonderful? Let me explain.

You see, let’s examine where we have been throughout this past Advent and Christmas Season. The new liturgical year began with Advent as we joined the ancient Hebrews who longed for the coming of the Messiah. Advent led us to Christmas when we celebrated the incarnation of our Lord and savior in the person of Jesus Christ. He is Lord because Jesus is the divine Son of God. He can be our savior because he united his divinity with our humanity. And now the Christmas season concludes with the Baptism of the Lord. This is appropriate and intentional.

You can imagine the scene. John is present performing one baptism after the other. All of the sudden Jesus is standing before him who he knows is also the Son of God. In our Gospel reading, John doesn’t feel worthy to unloosen the thongs on the Lord’s sandals let alone perform the Lord’s baptism. Jesus desires to be baptized by John because the whole point of the incarnation we celebrate at Christmas is that God is no longer a distant force in the universe. With the Baptism of the Lord, God has now submerged himself into our existence, into our reality, offering the potential for salvation to us in the process. You see, when Jesus is submerged in the waters of the Jordan, God himself sanctified the waters of baptism with his own nature. Those who receive the sacrament of baptism are now reborn as children of God by adoption.

The sacrament of baptism is therefore rightly understood as the first sacrament and doorway to the other sacraments of the Church. This idea is so central to Christianity that many churches over the years have constructed their baptismal fonts at the doors of the church. For example, one of the earliest churches ever built is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Their font is not located in the sanctuary but rather in the nave closer to the doors of the church. It is also interesting that this font is eight sided. Eight was a holy number for early Christians because Jesus’ resurrection happened on a Sunday, the first day of the week rather than the Sabbath. For these early Christians, the first day of the week was also the eighth day because, through our baptism and configuration to Christ, Sunday celebrates the day of resurrection, the day that never ends...the eighth day. This is why, by the way, our cupola above the sanctuary is eight sided and our font is located at the doors of our church. Baptism is the doorway to a relationship with Jesus.

And how do we merit this gift, of being transformed and welcomed into the mystical body of Christ through the waters of baptism? The answer is...we can't. The sacrament of baptism is a gift. It is an activity of God's grace. Grace comes from the word "gratis" meaning favor or without cost. This is why we also baptize infants who are unable to speak for themselves because baptism isn't meant to be understood as a choice we make. As Jesus told us plainly in the Gospel of John, "it is not you who chose me but I who chose you." Baptism is a gift and a liberating one. Baptism forgives us of our sins and liberates us from the yoke of original sin. It is a gift, we can't earn it.

However, just as at Christmas, many of us may have received a free gift of clothing that we can choose to wear or not. In the liturgy of baptism, we are given a baptismal garment to symbolize that we can choose to wear this gift or not. Discipleship of the Lord calls us to love God and to love our neighbor. Love, to be love, cannot be coerced. Whether or not we accept this gift of baptism and the salvation it offers through Jesus, wear it so to speak, is up to us.

This is why the sacrament of baptism is meant to be strengthened by the other sacraments the Lord has entrusted to the Church. The sacrament of confirmation strengthens our baptism with the gifts of the Holy Spirit calling us to mission. Just as the body needs nourishment, so does the soul which is why the Lord has given us his Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist. The Lord has given us sacraments of healing for times when we are wounded by sin or by sickness by giving us the sacraments of reconciliation and the anointing of the sick. The Lord has given us sacraments of vocation and for service to the community in the sacraments of marriage and holy orders. Again, these sacraments are gifts. As we have all seen, when these sacraments of vocation are lived well the Body of Christ flourishes, when the grace of these sacraments are rejected or profaned by bad choices or sin, the Body of Christ becomes wounded. We all know and have seen, from the pulpits to the pews, there are consequences when any of us refuse the grace given to us for the sake of our salvation. God will not force heaven on us if we refuse him.

This is why I sincerely wonder...is there any day in our life more wonderful or precious than the day of our baptism? In the waters of baptism, to paraphrase St. Paul, we have died with Christ so to rise with him in the resurrection. In the waters of baptism, we have been welcomed into the very life of the Holy Trinity. And so, after this homily, we will renew the vows of our own baptism, reject sin, and embrace the Gospel. In doing so, we will be celebrating the day of our baptism into the Body of Christ, the day we received the precious gift of a relationship with God himself. We do so recognizing that although the gift of a relationship with God has been freely given to us in the waters of baptism, how we wear this gift and celebrate this gift is sincerely up to us.