

EMPOWERING GRACE

Luke 3:15-18

Good News of Grace

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Over my years of ministry I have had the privilege of visiting a number of dynamic and growing churches around the country. As I explored some of the reasons why these churches are reaching out so effectively to people in their areas one major theme I often heard is how they are experiencing lots of new people coming to faith and being baptized.

It is these newly baptized who they attribute are fueling lots of energy, excitement and growth in their churches. These newly baptized people of faith are often so passionate about their relationship with Jesus that they worship each week without fail, they make sure they are in a Bible study and a small group, they do everything they can to grow as a disciple.

These newly baptized believers also are often so passionate about their faith that they can hardly contain themselves. They look for every opportunity they can to tell others about their new found faith. They are very concerned about their spiritually lost and seeking friends, wanting to do everything they can to witness to, invite to church, and encourage others to know Jesus.

And what is being experienced in many of these churches is that as lives are being changed and renewed by the love of Jesus; as people are being baptized into a passionate life of witness and growth these churches are often reaching large numbers of people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are often seeing growth that is amazing.

People are truly drawn to churches and communities of faith where lives are being changed, where they are given hope for healing in their hearts, their marriages, their families. People are drawn to people and communities where baptismal faith and new life are lived out.

Now I know that our Lutheran tradition and our focus on infant baptism is very different from most of these churches that emphasize “believer’s baptism.” Our tradition focuses on baptism as a sacrament where God claims and adopts us by his grace.

In this understanding God is the initiator with his promises while in believer’s baptism it is up to the person to respond to God’s grace through faith and then to make the decision to be baptized as a public affirmation of their belief. The focus is different.

And yet the Biblical message of baptism is the same whether one is baptized as an infant or adult. Mark 16:16 says, “*Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*” The purpose of baptism, whether infant or adult, is to empower people to believe and live for Jesus.

The purpose and power of baptism is also spelled out in our passage for today from Luke 3:16: “*John answered them all, ‘I baptize with water. But the one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’*”

Baptism, according to the Bible, is meant to nourish and empower each person in their faith and love for Jesus. And since the Holy Spirit is the one who calls us to faith and empowers us in

faith, our lives are to be filled with the fire and power of Jesus through his Holy Spirit. Jesus came to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Now one of the present day challenges with our Lutheran and sacramental understanding of baptism is that some people have come to think of it as something that is magical or hocus pocus, and that if a baby simply goes through this ritual that they are automatically saved.

It has become for some a “baptismal universalism” where everyone who is simply baptized will be saved regardless of their faith or actions. And it has become for some church people a “fire insurance policy” where they make sure their kids are baptized so that if they die suddenly from illness or accident they will be in heaven.

Sacramental baptism, however, is not universalism or a fire insurance policy. Rather, it is centered in believing parents presenting their children to God, claiming the promises of the water and the word, and promising to nurture, teach, be an example and bring their children up to know Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

Parents are asked, *“Do you promise to faithfully bring your child to the services of God’s house, and teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments...to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that living in the covenant of their baptism, and in communion with the church, they may lead a godly life.”*

This is not magic. It is not an automatic guarantee of salvation no matter what. It is rather God’s promises revealed in a visual way with water that needs to be nurtured and taught in the lives of our children. It is something where the faith, the worship priority and the Christ-like example of the parents is most important. As they say Christianity is more caught than taught.

Martin Luther even said in his small catechism that baptism *“means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drown through daily repentance, and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.”* It is a daily walk.

My deep concern today, my friends, is that even though Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists and many other church traditions are continuing to baptize many babies and children—is that we are often losing the fire and power of the Holy Spirit. We are often losing baptism’s transforming power where believers are going out and making disciples.

The result is that as baptism has become simply a nice ritual with robes and words; as there are many families who aren’t following through on the promises they made for their child; as many parents are neglecting to grow in their own faith, the more we have been losing our understanding of what Jesus intended baptism to be.

The result today is that there are more and more people who may have been baptized as a child but who claim they don’t really know who Jesus is. As a result there are lots of people who are seeking to find a life-giving faith in Jesus, a faith that gives them assurance in their hearts and which they can cling to in the challenges of life.

With many mainline denominations suffering and losing lots of members the reality is that just going through the baptism ritual, and just telling people they are baptized Christians is not often producing the fire and power of the Holy Spirit Jesus intended. It is often not bringing about dynamic believers who want to bring others to faith.

A study a few years ago (AAL) found that a significant number of our Lutheran young adults are abandoning Lutheran churches and are joining these independent and community churches around the country. While some church officials and pastors claim these young people are simply being drawn by flashy and consumer focus churches (which some might be), a more balanced evaluation is that increasing numbers are being drawn to these churches because Jesus is being made real to them.

I have visited with many people who say that even though they grew up Lutheran their whole life they never committed their life to Jesus. They never really learned their Bible, never learned how to share their faith. The interesting thing is that some of these people have actually made a public commitment of faith in their new church and have been baptized again.

Now what does this say about our mission and ministry at Messiah? While I completely support and affirm people finding a committed faith in these other churches, I believe it also means that our mission field as a church is also getting larger. It means that we as a congregation need to do a better job helping people truly know Jesus.

It means that we need to get more people into small fellowship groups where they can learn from others and find prayerful support in growing in or coming to a personal faith in Jesus. It means that all our worship, children's, youth and adult programs need to be centered on people of all ages coming to know and experiencing the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ.

And as we celebrate and promote being a Lutheran and sacramental church it also means that we need to reach out, and invite, adults and children who have not been baptized to be baptized in the promises of Jesus. The fact is that there may be people here today, and many in our community, who have never been baptized.

Whatever the reasons none of this really matters at all. The most important thing is that we are a church that offers baptism to any age, from any background. We offer a sacramental baptism centered in God's grace and promises, and yet which also affirms the faith and commitment people make. If you would like more information, please contact me.

My friends, the reality is that whether you were baptized as an infant, as a child or as an adult that Jesus wants to be real in you today and everyday by faith. He wants to continually renew and transform your life. And he wants to fill you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Just imagine for a moment what it would be like at Messiah if each one of us took our baptismal promises seriously, if each one of us would be open to the Holy Spirit renewing and empowering us in our faith. Just think of what it would be like if this living faith in Jesus was filling us all with a passion to worship, to grow and to share our faith with friends and family.

Wow, then Messiah will truly be the church God calls us to be. Then we will be a church that is reaching more people and helping them to know Jesus in a personal way. And then we will radiate the love and power of Jesus in such a way that lives, families, marriages and singles will be healed and filled with hope.

John said, *"I baptize with water...but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* May you be renewed in your baptism; may you be filled with the Holy Spirit and with fire as you live for Jesus each day by faith.