

*Regarding Baptisms***The Sacrament of Holy Baptism****St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Charlotte**

“Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church. In the waters of baptism, we are reminded that we belong to God and nothing can separate us from the love of God. We also find ourselves part of an extended family, one with Christians throughout the ages and across the world, what we call the “one, holy, catholic [meaning 'universal'], and apostolic Church.” Holy Baptism, *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 297-308.

Meaning of the Sacrament

There are many debates in the Church (catholic/universal) over the meaning of baptism. As a result, there is a wide spectrum of beliefs regarding what baptism actually does and who should receive it. The following reflection attempts to give an Anglican/Episcopal perspective on baptism.

Baptism a sacrament in the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, so it is important to know what a sacrament is in order to understand the Anglican perspective on baptism. Richard Hooker (who was a 16th century Anglican theologian) said that a sacrament is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.' The idea behind a sacrament is that God uses physical objects that we can easily comprehend (water in the case of baptism and bread and wine in the case of the Eucharist/Communion) along with the spoken word (the liturgical formulas specific to the sacrament) to convey redemptive grace on the recipient of the sacrament. The sacraments are in effect channels of grace that God provides us as a means of salvation.

The sacraments were a symbol of the truth during the early years when the Church struggled against sects like the Gnostics. The Gnostics essentially believed that all matter was bad and that only the spiritual realities mattered. The sacraments provide a direct counterpoint to that idea since they function as a connection between the physical world and the spiritual world. This has foundations in the theology of the Incarnation since God took on physical form as Jesus Christ.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Church, the Body of Christ. When one is baptized, sin is washed away for a new beginning, the Holy Spirit (“wisdom” of God) within the candidate is called upon, and the person is “formally” incorporated into the Church. This occurs regardless of whether a person is baptized as an infant, young child, youth, or adult, because the grace bestowed upon a person during baptism is an unmerited gift from God in God’s boundless mercy. We can do nothing in and of ourselves to earn this grace. Baptism is regenerative, which means that it bestows sanctifying grace and new life in Christ upon the recipient.

However, it is important to remember that our journey towards salvation is not completed in baptism. This is particularly true in the case of infant or young child baptism. During the ceremony parents (and godparents) make baptismal vows for the child. However, it is the parents' responsibility to ensure that the child understands the meaning of these vows and comes to grow in faith in Christ. As well, the godparents are to ensure the same. The ability of the child to exhibit this faith is itself a product of the sanctifying grace bestowed upon the child during baptism. When the child is older, he/she will have the opportunity via the sacrament of Confirmation to formally reaffirm and take as their own the baptismal vows made for them by his/her parents.

Salvation from the Anglican/Episcopal perspective is not so much an instantaneous event as a process with past, present, and future components. Baptism is the first step on a long journey. The dynamic nature of the salvation process does mean that we need to be vigilant against the sin of unbelief (and the resulting fall from grace). We should always take the time to remember our baptismal vows and how we are bound to Christ through His sacrament.

The Baptismal Covenant

A mini Catechism (outline/instructions) used at baptisms and special occasions, the Baptismal Covenant opens with a question-and-answer version of the statement of faith that is the Apostle's Creed and adds five questions regarding how we, as Christians, are called to live out our faith.

*The entire covenant is found in the Book of Common Prayer beginning at page 304.

Godparents/Sponsors

At least one godparents ("sponsor" of an infant, young child, youth) must be an active, baptized member of her/his congregation and must be present for the ceremony when the sacrament is administered. While she/he is not required to be an Episcopalian, it is important that she/he is active in a Christian community and will ensure that the godchild participates fully in the life of the child's Episcopal congregation, including regular worship attendance (at least monthly), Christian formation offerings, and other aspects of parish life, including stewardship of time, talent, and treasures. It is fitting that parents be included among the godparents of their own children, and every member of the parish is encouraged to seek ways to support the newly baptized on their journey to know and love God. All adults, especially godparents and parents, take vows on behalf of their baptismal candidate toward growth.

Preparation

Instruction for parents (of an infant, young child, or youth) or for the person to be baptized should occur prior to baptism (except in cases of emergency); it usually consists of the following aspects and/or a consultation with a clergy person: biblical and theological background of baptism; discussion of the responsibility and role of parents, sponsors/godparents; discussion of Christian parenting; and review of the baptismal liturgy. Seasonally, pre-baptismal instruction classes may be offered. Before the baptismal ceremony, a required rehearsal hosted by the clergy is announced for parents, godparents, and infant, young child, or youth to be baptized, and others to be baptized.

Stewardship

Interwoven with the sacrament of baptism is the spiritual practice of giving of one's time, talent, and treasures to support life at St. Peter's and God's Church. This three-fold ministry means that parents (when an infant, young child, or youth is being baptized) or the person to be baptized should be: known to the parish Clergy, a regular worship attendee (at least monthly), involved with in-reach and/or outreach opportunities, and known to the parish Treasurer based on a current pledge commitment to the Annual Fund that supports the parish operating budget.

Questions

If questions arise regarding the sacrament of Holy Baptism, its meaning, godparents/sponsors, the order of service/ceremony, preparation, and stewardship, please contact a St. Peter's priest or the staff Ministry Associate at the Parish Offices, 704.332.7746.

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