

The First Sunday after the Epiphany  
Baptism of our Lord  
Acts 19  
January 8, 2012  
Central Christian

*“... the baptism of John ...”*

Into what were you baptized? We are all baptized into something.

Paul arrives at Ephesus. There, he finds a group of disciples. But whose disciples? *Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?* he asks them. *What is you talking about, they reply. What is the Holy Spirit?* Paul realizes that there is something strange going on here, and so he asks, *Into what then were you baptized?* And they say, *the baptism of John.*

In the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul appeals to that congregation to be one, urges them to maintain the Spirit of unity. The basis for that appeal is theological. There is, the author says, *one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...*

Is that true? Is there just one baptism? In one sense, it is true. There is one baptism in Christ. It doesn't matter if you were baptized by Paul or Peter or Apollos or Michael or Chad or an elder of the church. It doesn't matter if you are sprinkled as a Methodist or dunked as a Baptist, there is just one baptism. If you are baptized into Christ, you are baptized into Christ. In that sense, it is true, there is just one baptism.

But in another sense, we know that there are many or many things into which we can be baptized. In Paul's time, there is not just the baptism of Jesus Christ, there is also the baptism of John the Baptist. Paul encounters a group of John's disciples in Ephesus. *Holy Spirit?* they say. *What's a Holy Spirit?* And Paul asks, *Into what were you baptized?*

John the Baptist attracted followers, just like Jesus did. Now, I have never met anyone who was baptized into John's baptism. There is a small group, the Mandaean, who still revere John as their greatest teacher, extremely small compared to the number of people who follow Jesus. But what I want us to realize is that there are many, many things into which we can be baptized. And I have met many people who have been baptized into something other than the baptism of Jesus.

Not literally baptized. Not physically dunked or sprinkled. When we baptize someone here at Central, we follow the practice of our heritage. We walk someone down into the pool of water, then lower her into the water. They get wet, head to toe. They are immersed. We baptize people that way because it most fully represents what we hope is happening here. We hope that the person who claims faith in Jesus Christ will become immersed in him.

You've heard people use that kind of language about all kinds of things. *She has immersed herself in her work. He is totally immersed in caring for the children. He is immersed in his own agenda.* That is what I mean when I say that most of us the baptized into something. What I mean is, most of us have given our lives to some cause or some institution or some activity or some purpose or some addiction. Not John's baptism. I know no one who has been baptized into John. But most of us, no, all of us have been baptized into something.

It is easy to see that some of the things into which we can immerse ourselves are dangerous or destructive. I once knew a man who was consumed by the desire to gamble. His was not, go to track once in the spring and once in the fall, put down the few dollars on every grey horse, kind of behavior. His was a compulsion, a disease, every bit as powerful

as an addiction to alcohol. He lived to bet on something, anything, it didn't really matter what he bet on. His need to gamble grew and grew. He bet to cover losses. Ultimately, he lost everything. Home and job and family and self-respect. He was baptized all right. He was immersed, head to toe, in his self-destructive addiction. If you or someone you know is like my friend, there is help. Please call Gambler's Anonymous.

We are all baptized into something. Sometimes that something is obviously harmful. But more often than not, our baptism is not conspicuously dangerous. We have all dipped our toe into the cultural assumption that the purpose in life is to consume. We have all been invited into the waters that tell us that the greatest measure of success is what we own. Increasingly it seems, we are all baptized into the assumption that my opinion is only one that really counts, that I determine for myself what is true and what is right. We all have been baptized into world that does not think it needs God to explain itself.

We are all baptized into something. Some are conscious choices we make. I know people who have willingly and gladly given themselves to their career at the expense of their relationship with their family. I know others who can think only of what they want or what they think they need. Conscious choices. But some of the things in which we find ourselves immersed is just the warp and woof of the world in which we live. We don't really choose to give ourselves to those things. Sometimes we are not even aware that we have walked into that pool. That's why they are so dangerous. They surround us and claim us, and, w/out realizing it, we give ourselves away.

The truth of the matter is, most of us have been baptized more than once. We have waded in rivers of faith and in pools of cultural influence. We have been asked to commit ourselves here and there and here and there, to

things that would claim our ultimate loyalty or insist on our ultimate allegiance. We are pulled. Torn. Into what were you baptized? I have been baptized into more things than I know or care to admit.

The story of Paul and the disciples of John reminds us there is more than one baptism. There are many things to which we can give ourselves, but only one which brings us into the presence of God. Paul's first question to his newfound friends in Ephesus is this. *Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?* And they said, *No, we did not know that there is such the thing as the Holy Spirit.* And so Paul tells them about Jesus of Nazareth, and they are baptized in his name. And then, Luke tells us, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

We have to be careful. It is easy to misread this story and come to the mistaken conclusion that there is something magic about being baptized in Jesus' name. It would be easy to read this story and believe (as some have) that the sign of God's presence is always the kind of unusual behavior. If that is all we see in this story, we have missed the point. The point is, giving yourself to Jesus Christ, being immersed in Jesus Christ, deciding to follow Jesus Christ, claiming Jesus Christ as lord of your life, being baptized into Jesus will change your life. All other claims on your loyalty become secondary. All other commitments become relative. Baptism into Christ (not just the physical act of getting wet all over but of submerging yourself into his life), baptism into Christ will transform you, will make you different, will make you new.

People who are baptized into Christ think differently and act differently and see the world in a new way. I'm not talking about speaking in strange tongues. I'm talking about stranger behavior than that. I'm talking about loving God and loving neighbor. About loving enemies and praying for

those who would harm us. About forgiving those who sin against us and about having compassion for the weak or poor. About not seeing ourselves as better than others. These are the signs that a person is filled with the Holy Spirit. These are signs of the presence of God.

We are all baptized into something. And baptism shapes the direction and content of our life. Into what have you been baptized?