

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/11/2009, The Baptism of Our Lord
Acts 19:1-7

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²And [Paul] said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”(Acts 19:1b-2, RSV)

In a short while, after this sermon, we are going to experience one of the most lovely things I can imagine: the baptism of a mother and daughter. I am speaking of the baptism of Laura and little Emma. Ted is a lucky man, I bet you all agree with me.

Martin Luther used to say that it is one thing to be baptized, but something else, something greater, to *use* your baptism. Luther was referring to the troubling reality even back in his pious day that sometimes babies are baptized, but not raised in the faith of the Church. And what good is that? Life is long and sometimes we enter hot peaks of temptation or dark valleys of discouragement when it would mean a lot to us to be able to say, “At least I am baptized! At least I am Christ’s man, Christ’s woman. At least there is Someone in this world who loves me and wants me to be good.” But if the baptized baby is raised in ignorance of Christ, how is she going to be strengthened by her baptism? How is he going to be braced in life by his baptism?

Well, we need not fear such things for this family. This mother, Laura, is not going to neglect to teach her daughter about Jesus, for she is embarking upon the adventure of being Christ’s woman right along with her daughter. She is doing it as a grown-up, God bless her! She is being baptized of her own free will, as a thoughtful adult. And in being baptized, she joins her husband, Ted, in constituting a Christian family. Emma will be growing up in a family of faith, and I do believe that this is going to be a blessing for our world and for each member of this family.

So, that is one distinction concerning baptism. It is one thing to be baptized, but it is something greater to use your baptism in times of discouragement or temptation.

Luther used to point to a similar distinction when preaching about Christmas. Luther never wearied of saying that it is one thing to believe that a Saviour has been born on this old planet of ours. But it is something different and something much greater to believe that this Saviour has been born *for you*. Each of us may slip in our own name here. “[Your name] Gregory, the Saviour has been born *for you*. As you go on through life, you will never be an orphan, you will never be abandoned, you will never be without your Saviour. Take heart, then, and look to him.”

Well, this morning’s Second Lesson speaks of a similar distinction. St. Paul would have us understand that it is one thing to be a “disciple,” but it is something else, and something greater, to receive the Holy Spirit.

There is something missing in the souls of the disciples in this Bible story. They have been baptized by John the Baptist. Surely they are good people, indeed, they are those high spiritual people called “penitents.” They are the ones in this world who are actually trying to be as good as our Maker wants us to be. It is just that they do not yet know Jesus. As they put it:

...we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

And this signals that they have tried to turn *from* sin and darkness, but they have not yet learned the One they should be turning *toward*.

The *reformation* of a human life is a wonderful thing. But even more wonderful is the *sanctification* of a human life. Many of us have known reformation. The wreck and ruin of many resolves lie behind us. The confessions of sin and the heartfelt intention to do better have come and gone. New Year's resolutions litter the landscape of our past. It was good that we tried! But our Maker has something better in mind for you and for me.

In this morning's story about the Ephesian disciples, there is no disputing as to whether those good men and women were indeed "disciples." St. Paul says no discouraging word to them. He does not belittle their repentance, nor their desire to mend their ways. He does not criticize their pastor, John the Baptist — that good man who had so profoundly influence them and helped them to become better people. Still, St. Paul desires more for them. They have made a good beginning in baptized by John the Baptist. Now, Paul hopes that they will move on from strength to strength and be baptized not simply into John's baptism, but something even more wonderful: that they should be baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus."

John the Baptist was a great man, but Jesus is better. John can carry you a long way, but Jesus can carry you ever farther. John can lead you into repentance, but Jesus can lead into holiness of life.

It might be impolite to ask Paul's question to a believer, but it might also be helpful to that one's soul: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"¹ There sits the miser, for example, counting his gold. He is a Christian, yet he seems to care more about his gold than Christ. He piles it up. It reflects the light with a warm glow. It comforts his heart. Yet we read of the Holy Spirit that *he* is the Comforter — not cold gold, but the Holy Spirit. Surely the life and the love of Jesus should mean something to him and should help fortify him for life. But he seems to be depending only on his gold. And so, Dear Miser, you are baptized, you have believed on Jesus Christ, but did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

Or you angry man: Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believe? I can tell by your curses and your frowns and by your criticisms that you have received a spirit of impatience, but have you receive the Spirit of our Lord Jesus. Have you even tried? Or did you just sit there like a bump on the log? When Jesus was reviled and mocked, he did not answer back with curses. He was silent or, even more marvelous, he prayed for those who persecuted him. Are you even trying to show something of his spirit in your life? Are you even practicing his ways or *pretending* his ways, which is a good step toward making those ways your own. Are you even giving it a try?

Or here is an awkward question for these trying times: You Anxious One: did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you notice about Jesus that he lived a life of simplicity? Did you notice that he did not pile up debt? That he did not pile up possessions, indeed that he was willing to be a poor man with nowhere to lay his head? Did you notice that he kept his eye on the divine dimension: that he encouraged us to lay up treasure in heaven, more than treasure on earth, and that the way to lay up treasure in heaven is to be people of kindness and charity toward others? Did you take to heart his

¹ The awkwardness of this question was pointed out by the English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon in his sermon of 1884 "Receiving the Holy Spirit."

teaching about the birds of the air and about the lilies of the field and his clear call to us, then, that we should not be anxious?

From the early days of the church to this very day, baptism has always included a double movement — a turning *away from* sin, but also a turning *toward* Jesus. That is, baptism always includes the Ephesian step: the step from repentance toward Spirit. “We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit,” they say to Paul. Well, it is time they learn of the Spirit. Aye, it is time that they become sanctified by that Spirit!

In the ancient practice of baptism, the double movement of baptism was especially clear, especially vibrant. You have probably heard me preach before about the very dramatic “renunciation of sin” in the ancient baptisms — how those being baptized would stand up, face west (from whence comes the nightfall and darkness in this world), shake their fists and shout out “Satan, I reject you, and all your false ways, and all your false promises.” The remnants of this renunciation remain in the baptism liturgy to this very day, which you will soon see in this morning’s baptism.

Then those being baptized would rotate so that they faced east, toward the dawn, toward the light of this world, and they would confess what they were turning *toward*. “I believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son... I believe in the Holy Spirit...”

The problem is that this confession of the faith of the church seems so calm and intellectual. I wish there were something physical and dramatic for it — something akin to that dramatic shaking of the fist and shout out toward the darkness. What I wish is that somehow it could be signified that in turning from darkness, the one being baptized was flinging herself into the arms of Jesus, flinging himself into the arms of Jesus. I wish that there were some liturgical act by which the one being baptized could signal to the world and to herself, to himself, that henceforth, Jesus is mine and I am his and that I mean to grow in his Spirit. For I believe that that is what it means to not only believe in Jesus, but also to receive the Holy Spirit.

When I say that John can lead us into repentance, but that Jesus can lead us into something higher, I am not speaking of magic, but of permission. I am not saying that being baptized into the name of our Lord Jesus automatically makes you holy, but it does give you permission to strive for holiness. If you will not strive, then that is your choice. But if you will strive, the Triune God promises you that your striving shall not be in vain.

By this stage in your life, you know something about Jesus. You know something about his gentleness, but also about his iron discipline of himself. You know that when he was reviled, he did not answer back with curses, but with a prayer for those who crucified him: Father, forgive them...” You know that he was willing to be a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head, that you and I might have a chance to be rich in hope and rich in eternity. You know of his friendliness toward sinners — how it was muttered about him that he ate with outcasts and sinners. You know how he said to the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more.” You know a hundred good things about Jesus. Did you know that it is the desire of our Maker that you should become like him?

I might admire a great violinist, say, Jascha Heifetz, but it does not mean that God has crafted me to strive to become like him. It is not clear that my Maker has given me permission to become Heifetz-like. But *I do* have permission to become Christ-like. Again, I might admire a great running back, like, say, Jim Brown of the old Cleveland Browns, but it does not follow that it is the will of the Triune God that I should strive to become like him. I have not been built for that. But *I have been built* for conformity to

Christ. It *is* the will of the Triune God that I should become like Jesus. I have divine permission to strive for that great calling. And so do you.

So, the Ephesian disciples had started a good path: they had repented of their sins and turned away from them. But their path will become even better when they turn toward Jesus. To turn away from sin is good, but negative. To turn toward Jesus is more: indeed, it is the adventure we need to make the best of the years left to us, and it is the adventure the world needs from us.

Now we turn to this lovely event, the baptism of Laura and little Emma. There will come a point in the liturgy which technically bears the name “Confirmation.” It refers to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is the solemn prayer for the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit upon this mother and daughter. The words go like this:

Pour your Holy Spirit upon Laura and Emma: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence. Amen.

Our springtime “confirmations” of our catechism students, Amanda and Lilas, will be related to this original confirmation. In those springtime confirmations, we will be praying for the “stirring up” of the Holy Spirit in those two young women, which is a wonderful prayer.

But here we witness the original divine dealings with Laura and Emma. Here we witness the prayer of the Church that the Holy Spirit will come into these two women. We are praying not simply that they will *believe* in Jesus, but that they will *love* him, and in loving him, come to resemble him.

And so, let us add our Amen to that laying on of hands and prayer for the Spirit. Let us pray that prayer most fervently, for we are asking for something blessed in the life of Laura and Emma and something beneficial for this world.

To this One into whose name the Ephesians were baptized and into whose name we are invited to be baptized too, belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.