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1/11/2015, The Baptism of our Lord
Baptism with the Holy Spirit

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

⁷And [John] preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you *with the Holy Spirit.*” (Mark 1:7-8, RSV)

In this text, John the Baptist distinguishes his baptism from that of Jesus, admitting that his baptism is a poor thing compared to that of Jesus. In this sermon, I want to explore the distinction between John’s baptism and that of Jesus. We ourselves have been baptized with the greater baptism. John says that our baptism is better than anything he could do because we have been baptized “with the Holy Spirit.” This goes beyond the ability of John the Baptist. So, let’s try to speak of this baptism “with the Holy Spirit” and try to understand why John thought so well of it.

My plan is to probe the distinction between John’s baptism and that of Jesus by making use of a distinction that was very important to the early Lutheran Reformers — the distinction between the holy law of God and the ability *to do* that holy law. But before turning to that, let’s linger a while with that strange story in our Second Lesson — the story of St. Paul’s visit to the early Christians in Ephesus.

EPHESUS

Some of our people have visited that ancient town in Turkey. I believe that Rev. Kelly-Ray Meritt, who loves to sing in our choir and who was of such help to us when I was recovering from heart surgery, has visited Ephesus. Our members Darryl and Aggie Scherba and their daughter, Annie, have stirring memories of visiting that town. So do Ellie Watrous and Evelyn Junge. Perhaps others of you have visited there too.

Well, when St. Paul visited Ephesus, he seems to have been somewhat bewildered by the Christians there. The text calls them “disciples.” It does not call them “disciples of John,” but simply “disciples,” as if they are disciples of Christ. St. Paul approaches them as if they are Christians, and probably they are. Perhaps they are like that mighty preacher Apollos whom we meet in the preceding chapter. The text says of Apollos that he preached accurately the things concerning Jesus, but he knew only the baptism of John:

He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:25, RSV)

There seems to have been something off-kilter about Apollos. He spoke of Jesus “accurately,” and yet the more experienced Christians Priscilla and Aquila listening to him felt obliged to take him aside and give him more instruction:

And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. (Acts 18:26, KJV)

Apollos seems to have all the tools to be an apostle. He was eloquent, “mighty in the scriptures,” fervent in spirit, and taught accurately concerning Jesus. Yet he lacked *something*. The text says that he knew “only the baptism of John.” That is good — very, very good. But John the Baptist himself spoke of a higher baptism — baptism “with the Holy Spirit.”

Likewise with these disciples in today’s story. St. Paul meets them and he addresses them as Christians, but he is puzzled by them. There is something not quite complete about them. Like Apollos, they have been baptized with the baptism of John, but not yet with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They claim that they did not even know that there is a Holy Spirit.

This all makes me a bit uneasy.¹ I cannot help but wonder what St. Paul would think if he were to meet *me* or were to visit our congregation. Would he think that something ails me? That I am not quite complete yet? That I am lacking something? Indeed, that I am lacking the baptism “with the Holy Spirit”?

JOHN’S BAPTISM WAS A GOOD BAPTISM

One thing to say about John’s baptism is that it was a *good* baptism, and God bless all those folks who were baptized by him. The heart of John’s baptism was repentance. In fact it was called a “baptism of repentance” (Mark 1:4, also Acts 19:4 in today’s Second Lesson). Those folks had heard that God was near at hand, and so they wanted to do the right thing: they wanted to repent and mend their ways. I hope it would be same with you and me. If we knew that Jesus was coming again any day now, or that we had some fatal illness and would soon be seeing Jesus, I hope that we would do the best we could to repent and to get ourselves ready to see the Lord. Or if we heard the preaching of some mighty

¹ Credit for this discussion of Apollos and the early Ephesian Christians and his soul-searching question about whether St. Paul would be bewildered by us too goes to John M. Rottman in his notes on Acts 19:1-7 in *The Lectionary Commentary—The Second Readings*

preacher like John the Baptist and were led thereby to turn away from sin, to grieve over the harm we had done, and to try to live out our remaining years better, then good for us. God bless all people who try to repent and to live a more holy life.

And yet John's baptism left people lacking something.

LUTHERANS

Now, let's turn to the Lutheran Reformers I mentioned and try to figure out the advantage of Christian baptism versus the baptism of John the Baptist.

In the Lutheran Confessional documents you can see that the Lutherans are trying to respond to a charge brought against them by their Catholic opponents. It appears that the Catholics feared that the Lutherans did not believe in "good works." The Catholics complained that the Lutherans did not believe in the kinds of good deeds that were appropriate for the penitential life. That is, the Catholics seem to fear that the Lutherans did not believe in the kind of repentance that John the Baptist was preaching. The Lutherans so emphasized Justification by Faith that the Catholics figured that they left themselves no good reason to be much concerned about holiness of life.

This was very frustrating for the Lutheran Reformers. You can almost hear the exasperation in their writings. The Reformers want to answer that they do not oppose good works, but simply a *false opinion* concerning good works, to wit, the false and dangerous opinion that we can be saved by our good works. As for the good works themselves, the Lutherans tried to say again and again that they are necessary for a Christian.

In fact, the Lutherans went a step farther. They answered their opponents that not only did they believe in good works, but they so taught the Gospel that it became possible for Christians at last to do good works.

And so, in the *Augsburg Confession* we read this:

Hence it is readily apparent that no one should accuse this teaching of prohibiting good works. On the contrary, it is rather to be commended for showing *how we can do* good works. For without faith human nature cannot possibly do the works of the First or Second Commandments.... That is why Christ said (John 15[:5]): "Apart from me you can do nothing." (Augsburg Confession, Concerning Faith and Good Works, Kolb/Wengert, page 57)

I think that this is an interesting distinction. It is one thing to be told what the holy law of God is. It is something else and something greater to be strengthened to do that holy law. I think this is part of the distinction between the baptism of John and baptism "with the Holy Spirit."

GATEWAY TO THE SOUL

How many times have we poor people on earth tried to reform ourselves! We have sworn off drink, only to return to it soon afterwards. We have sworn off wrath, only to raise angry fist again too soon afterwards. We have repented of vice again and again, only to fall back into it. If we have such experience, it is possible that the good people who were baptized by John had those experiences too.

But Baptism into Jesus is a different matter. Baptism into Jesus is that great gateway into our souls, in which we invite the Holy Spirit to take up residence within us, and to transform us for the good — indeed, to sanctify us, so that we become more and more to resemble Jesus of Nazareth. The same old paths should not be good enough anymore. We should permit ourselves to be inspired by Jesus.

The Holy Spirit desires for us that the story of Jesus should dwell not simply in our heads, but also in our hearts. We should seek to let the Holy Spirit stir us up, make us braver, kinder, more gentle, more like Christ himself.

OUR SUBJECTIVITY

In talking about the Holy Spirit, I am talking about our subjectivity. I am talking about our sense of who we are and what we are trying to accomplish in life. I am talking about the ideals that shape our conduct and about what kind of person are we striving to be in this world. I am talking about the possibility of change — of changing the kind of people we are. I am talking about letting the image of Christ take form within us.

Let me give you an example. I speak now of a Psalm prayer from my private devotions earlier this week. I was building my devotions on Psalm 39, which is a magnificent Psalm, in my opinion. The older I get the more moved I am by this verse, for example, from Psalm 39:

⁴LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.
(Psalm 39:4, KJV)

Such a verse can humble a man, humble a woman. It reminds us that we do not live forever. If there is some good we hope to accomplish in this life, we should not put it off. Rather, we should seek to know “the measure of our days, what it is,” and turn this day to the good that lies possible for us while we still have some time.

So, I worked my way through this Psalm and came to the appointed Psalm prayer in our worship book, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. The prayer goes this way:

Heavenly Father, through your Son you taught us not to fear tomorrow but to commit our lives to your care. Withhold not your Spirit from us, but help us find a life of peace after these

days of trouble; for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (LBW Psalm Prayer for Psalm 39)

Pretty words, are these, and a worthy prayer to our Heavenly Father. But how much even more wonderful it would be if we did not just pray to have no fear of tomorrow, to commit ourselves into God's care, and to find a life of peace, but actually knew and experienced some measure of these things in our hearts. For these spiritual realities and graces lie available to each of us. If we are baptized, then the Holy Spirit desires to lift us up, to strengthen and calm our hearts as we face this world. Indeed, the Holy Spirit desires to make of you and me that we should become "little Christs" in this world.

Many of you will remember our sister in the Lord Lori Burnett. She recently moved to Hawaii. Well, that phrase "little Christs" meant a lot to her. It means a lot to me too. I believe that that is what the Holy Spirit is after in us: that we should become little Christs on earth.

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Compared to the people baptized by John, you and I have more power available to us to be good. We have more capacity for goodness because we believe that we have a Champion who fights at our side, as Martin Luther put it. We know the whole story of Jesus in a way that even John the Baptist did not know it. He could call people to repentance and amendment of life. But he could not entrust his people to our living Savior!

Baptism into Jesus means that the resurrected and living Jesus Christ is our Guardian, our Good Shepherd, our Saviour, and therefore we can *afford* to be good in a way we could not if we had no Savior. The pursuit of a holy life is possible for people who have a Savior to pick us up when we fall.

Our risen Jesus is willing to set up residence in our hearts and to live his holy life through our lowly lives if we are willing to let him. The resurrection of Jesus and his Holy Spirit on earth opens up possibilities of goodness that we did not have before. Baptism in his name means that Jesus specifies you and me as the human locations on earth in which he longs to dwell and longs to work for the good of the world. So let's turn to those possibilities in the time that remains to us. Let's turn to them with joy, to the benefit of our neighbors and to the glory of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.