

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH
SIXTH MEETING: JANUARY 31
HOLY BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

CONFIRMATION 2009-2010

This is the first of our meetings in which we discuss the sacraments. After a brief introduction to sacraments in general, we will focus on Holy Baptism. Because of the relationship between baptism and confirmation, we will again discuss confirmation in this lesson. The rubric used here to analyze the sacraments could also be used at our next meeting when we will look at the Holy Eucharist, though we will not do so in a systematic way.

Opening Prayer:

Almighty God, by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you turn us from the old life of sin: Grant that we, being reborn to new life in him, may live in righteousness and holiness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

SACRAMENTS

What are the two sacraments we commonly celebrate in the church?

Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist. According to the Catechism, these are the "two great sacraments of the Gospel," "the two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church."

What are the other sacramental rites?

Confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, and unction (anointing of the sick or dying). The difference between these five and the two "great sacraments" is that they are not necessary for all persons in the same way that Baptism and the Eucharist are. That is to say, they walk like sacraments, talk like sacraments, act like sacraments--but are not called sacraments by virtue of their not being in the Gospel.

So, what is a sacrament? That would seem to be the six million dollar question here, wouldn't it? The definition that I was forced to memorize in Catholic school was "a visible and tangible sign of God's invisible grace." In the catechism, it is defined in much the same way, "an outward an visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (BCP, 857).

Strategy for Examining Sacraments

So here is the strategy we're going to employ for examining sacraments and sacramental rites:

What is the outward and visible sign?

God did not ordain the sign at random. There is a deep connection between the sign and God's grace that is effective in the sacrament. One of the ways of exploring the sign is to think of stories or imagery from the Old and New Testament that associate with the sign.

Who can perform the sacrament or sacramental rite?

This might seem like a silly question, but the restrictions on who can perform the sacrament indicate quite a lot about the relationship of the sacrament to the Church, the Body of Christ.

Read the instructions (even if you're a male!).

The instructions tell us how the church conceives of the sacramental rite and its place in the worshiping life of the church.

Read the rite itself (*lex orandi lex credendi*), paying particular attention to the following questions:

What is the description of the state of the person receiving the sacrament?
That is, why do we need God's grace?

What is state of the person after sacrament? That is, what is the effect of God's grace in the sacrament?

What are the words that go with the sacramental act itself?

What is the congregation's response (if any)?

On the following pages, we'll go through this exercise with both Baptism and Confirmation.

[see attached]

Closing Prayer:

Grant, Almighty God, that we, who have been redeemed from the old life by our baptism into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, may be renewed in your Holy Spirit, and live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Individual Petitions, The Lord's Payer

HOLY BAPTISM:

What is the outward and visible sign?

Water

What stories or imagery from the Old and New Testament associate with the sign?

(Water is a very basic human image and played a substantial role in Jewish cultic practices relating to purity; the suggestions below only skim the service of the biblical imagery of water.)

Waters of creation (Genesis 1:2): Water is the primal element in the creation story, from which everything else is separated. Think of this water in the sense of the "waters of the womb"—the waters are an integral part of the image of (a new) creation.

Noah and the Ark (Genesis 7-8; cf. also 1 Peter 3:18-22): As we discussed in our second meeting, the problem with which God was dealing in the story of Noah and the Ark was sin. And God's solution was to drown sin. Quite literally, evil had to die.

Crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14): In the history of the interpretation of this passage, the Egyptians are understood to represent the evil which constantly pursues and threatens to enslave God's people. And, like the story of Noah and the Ark, evil is drowned.

Baptism of Jesus by John (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22): This story is obviously important both for example Jesus gives us of going through baptism and for the tangible sign of the Trinity (God the Father = voice; Holy Spirit = dove; and Jesus the Son). However, it should not be missed that the baptism takes place in the Jordan river, a river of enormous significance in Israelite thought, as it separates the world from the Promised Land. Just as the waters of the Jordan must be crossed to enter the Promised Land, so the waters of baptism must be crossed to enter the promised new life in Christ.

Piercing of Jesus' Side (John 19:31-37): When the soldier pierces Jesus' side, both water and blood flow from the wound. The blood, obviously, would be expected. The water is more miraculous, and it relates baptism by water in the spirit to the crucifixion.

What images come to mind when you think of water?

Perhaps the easiest way to associate water and baptism is water's cleansing ability. This is very apt; the *Book of Common Prayer* refers to those "who are here cleansed from sin." Moreover, the sort of baptism practiced by John the Baptist (who baptized Jesus), was about repentance of sin. Baptism also bears some relationship with the Jewish practice of washing in a *mikvah*, which was

sort of like a large bathtub used for ritual cleansing purposes. So one way to think of baptism is that it's like a shower to wash all the sin off.

However, as the stories of Noah and the Crossing of the Red Sea indicate, God's solution to sin is not simply to wash it off. God's solution to sin is to kill it. As we will see as we look further at the rite, in baptism the old, sinful self drowns (the symbolism of this is clearer in immersion baptism, when the whole person is dunked under water). Baptism is a drowning; but it does not end there, we are brought back out of the water, born into new life. This is why we say that in baptism we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection.

Who can perform the sacrament or sacramental rite?

If present, the bishop performs the baptism. Otherwise (and much more commonly), the priest performs the baptism. In special circumstances, the bishop may provide that a deacon performs the baptism. Finally, in the case of an emergency, any baptized Christian may perform the baptism. This means you. You can baptize.

Why do you think we have a provision for "Emergency Baptism" (BCP, 313).

The implication of this is that baptism is necessary to ensure salvation. In large part, it is this understanding of baptism that led the church to practice of infant baptism.¹ This view of baptism, that it is necessary to ensure salvation, may not be palatable to you—though it very much is a part of our prayer book and tradition. I would stress that it is not the same as saying baptism is necessary for salvation; only that the grace provided in baptism provides an assurance not otherwise available. In saying much else, either that baptism is or is not necessary for salvation, one risks constraining the freedom of God to judge as God so chooses.

Read the instructions.

A few notes regarding the instructions. First, the description of baptism is very important:

"Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble" (BCP 298).

This is very important. Once baptized, the person is fully a member of the Christian community. There is no other level of membership in Christ's Church. Even confirmation in no way makes you more of a member of the Body of Christ. Furthermore, nothing, absolutely nothing, can break the bond established by God

¹ In a culture with very high infant and child mortality rates and in which baptism was understood as being necessary to ensure salvation, if baptism was not available until one reached adulthood, then many, many people would die unbaptized and, the fear was, damned.

(this does not mean that people who are baptized are incapable of turning their backs on God).

Secondly, baptism is supposed to be part of a Eucharistic service. This is because baptism, as a celebration of initiation into the Christian community, is a communal service. In the past, it has been customary to hold baptisms as special family services done privately (this is how I was baptized), but this obscures the connection between baptism and welcome into the community.

Finally, note the part about godparents. Though we don't often treat it as such, being a godparent is a very important obligation; when someone agrees to become a godparent, they are taking the vows of baptism upon themselves. This is not something to enter into lightly—the godparent bears an enormous responsibility.

Read the rite itself...

What is the description of the state of the person receiving the sacrament? That is, why do we need God's grace?

You can get a sense of the person apart from baptism by the renunciations on pp. 302-03 in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The old life suffers from:

- Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God
- the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God
- sinful desires that draw you from the love of God

What is state of the person after sacrament? That is, what is the effect of God's grace in the sacrament?

- turned to Jesus Christ and know him as savior
- trust Christ's grace and love
- follow and obey Christ as Lord

Baptism begins when the person acknowledges the evil and sin they do not want to be a part of their life and claim that what they want to be is Christ's own. The problem is, we cannot get from the old to the new by ourselves. Only by God's grace can we move from the old self to the new self.

The prayers on pp. 305-06 contain our petition that God effect that change in us.

- Deliver them, O Lord, from the way of sin and death.
- Open their hearts to your grace and truth.
- Fill them with your holy and life-giving Spirit.
- Keep them in the faith and communion of your holy Church.
- Teach them to love others in the power of the Spirit.
- Send them into the world in witness to your love.
- Bring them to the fullness of your peace and glory.

Another way of looking at all this is in the concluding collect to these petitions, "Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory; who lives and reigns now and for ever. Amen."

The only way to get from the old self to the new self is die and rise again. Sin must die, and we are reborn in new life.

What are the words that go with the sacramental act itself?

N., I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Notice here the Trinitarian affirmation. This is the core of fellowship in the Christian community; Christians generally all recognize each other's Trinitarian baptism as sufficient, as this is the baptism explicitly commanded by Christ in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

What is the congregation's response (if any)?

The congregation receives them "into the household of God." And the congregation also affirms what membership in that household requires of us: we are to "confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood." You are not done once you are baptized; on the contrary, you're only just getting started.

CONFIRMATION:

What is the outward and visible sign?

The laying on of hands as a symbol of the renewal of the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is a common symbol, and can particularly be seen in the ordination rite. As a way of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, see 1 Timothy 4:14 and Hebrews 6:2.

Who can perform the sacrament or sacramental rite?

Confirmation can only be performed by the bishop; it is expected that those adults baptized by a priest will seek out the opportunity of confirmation for the laying on of hands by the bishop. This has largely to do with the role of the bishop in the understanding of the church. The bishops are the successors of the apostles, and it is through their relationship to one another that the church finds its unity. Technically, all sacramental ministry in the church is the bishops', priests are ordained specifically to help the bishop carry out his ministry (there is too much for the bishop to do anything). We could (happily) get lost in a conversation about church history here, but before that happens, think of it like this: because confirmation is performed by the bishop, every Christian is connected to the church through a direct connection with the apostles.

Read the instructions.

In addition to the instructions regarding the bishop's role (see above), note the description of confirmation: "In the course of their Christian development, those baptized at an early age are expected, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and to receive the laying on of hands by the bishop."

This applies to all of you here today; when you were baptized, others took the vows on your behalf. Confirmation is the time when, if you are ready, you will confirm those vows and your commitment to them. In a sense, confirmation fills that which is lost in infant baptism, the affirmation of one's own faith and acceptance of Christ. As Leonel L. Mitchell has written, "Confirmation is the renewal of the baptismal covenant, not its completion" (*Praying Shapes Believing*, 119).

Read the rite itself...

What is the description of the state of the person receiving the sacrament? That is, why do we need God's grace?

The person being confirmed recognizes that as a baptized Christian, they have died with Christ and have been born again in his resurrection. And yet, at the same time, the person recognizes that the power of sin and evil is very

much real and to avoid falling into it necessitates constant vigilance and God's strength. The confirmand is recognizing his or her need for renewal and strength in their baptismal covenant.

What is state of the person after sacrament? That is, what is the effect of God's grace in the sacrament?

The sacrament is a confirmation (ha!) of that which has already taken place in baptism. The candidate is in the same place as a baptized person, just reaffirming his or her position there: they have rejected evil and renewed their commitment to Jesus Christ.

What are the words that go with the sacramental act itself?

There are two options, we will go with the first: "Strengthen, O Lord, your servant N. with your Holy Spirit; empower him/her for your service; and sustain him/her all the days of his/her life. Amen."

What is the congregation's response (if any)?

Prior to the laying on of hands, the congregation has affirmed their willingness to support the newly confirmed in their life in Christ (*BCP*, 416). The congregational response is simply the Peace. The Peace is a part of every Sunday service, but its place immediately following Confirmation should not be missed. The recently confirmed are no more a part of Christ's Church than they were before, but they have publicly affirmed their faith and the passing of the peace provides the congregation with the opportunity to greet them and acknowledge their public act.