

A STORY OF BAPTISM

January 2019

In the Liturgical Calendar, the first Sunday after the Epiphany is celebrated as 'The Baptism of the Lord.' It is a time of remembering Jesus' Baptism, and often it is an occasion for the Renewal of our Baptismal Covenant. Baptism, for me as a Pastor, has from the beginning been a rich privilege. Baptism is unique, the entrance rite into the privileges and responsibilities of the community of faith. At its best it is a gift that reminds us that we belong to God, a time when we know where we have come from, who we are, and to whom we belong, assuring us that life can change, that the old and painful can pass away and yield to a new and meaningful life. With that in mind, let me share with you, out of the experience of my ministry, a story of Baptism.

The families were very different. About the only thing they had in common was a connection to the same church, and a desire to have a child baptized, as it turned out, on the same day.

It's important to visit in each home before each baptism. In the first place one has to get some basic information for the church records, which, until modern times, were often the only public record of a person's existence. - name, parents, birth date, and birth place. More significant is the opportunity to interpret the meaning of baptism itself: an acknowledgment of this as a precious child of God, an affirmation of the faith of the church and the family, a review of the expectations and responsibilities of the family and the congregation, and a loving welcome given to a new child of God. From a practical point of view, Baptisms are just easier when people know each other.

Daniel slept through my visit. His home was a comfortable place: Mom and Dad, an older brother, a lovely neighborhood, and lots in the environment to stimulate a child's curiosity and growth. I was careful to include his brother Patrick in the evening so that he could deal with Daniel being the center of attention.

Kaitlyn was older and bounced around the sparse environment of her single Mom's public housing apartment. The TV was on but she mostly ignored it and, the whole while I was there, she tried to distract her Mother's attention from an unwelcome visitor. Her Mother was working very hard to provide a good home and do the right thing. Baptism had become very important to her.

Baptism is a public rite, a celebration in the context of a congregation's worship. And so, on the appointed Sunday, I invited two very different families to come forward for Baptism. Daniel was curled up in his Mother's arms and Patrick walked with his Dad, carrying his well loved and somewhat limp stuffed dog. Kaitlyn was thrashing in her Mother's arms, crying a piercing panic stricken scream.

As I started the Baptismal Service it was clear that the congregation was growing uncomfortable. Kaitlyn's Mother was embarrassed, Daniel's family was non-plussed to say the least. This was going to be a Baptism that people would remember for a long time.

By now Kaitlyn's crying had frightened Daniel and he began to whimper. The whole scene was going downhill very rapidly. That is, until Patrick stepped in.

His Father had picked him up. He was staring wide-eyed at the shrieking Kaitlyn. That's when the first miracle occurred. And there was an audible gasp from the congregation as Patrick held out his beloved stuffed dog to Kaitlyn. Without a word he was saying, "Here, maybe this will help." Kaitlyn threw her

arms around it, buried her face in this gift from heaven, and, with two loud deep breaths, stopped crying.

We went on with the Service. Daniel and Kaitlyn were baptized and acknowledged as children of God for the people of God. But Patrick was beginning to recognize the potential cost of his sacrifice. Kaitlyn had his beloved stuffed dog! He began to cry, quietly at first, and then out loud. Now it was Kaitlyn's turn. Seeing Patrick's distress, she offered the gift she had received back to him. The congregation gasped again, having witnessed the second of the miracles of love and sharing.

I don't remember what I preached about that day. What I do remember are two precious children of God from two very different families, nestled quietly in the arms of love. I believe that, in this story of baptism, is a witness to the miracle of God's Love, a visible sign of the Grace of God, available, without exception, to all.