

Sermon, , June 25, 2023

Romans 6:1-11

“Walking in Newness of Life”

I have been reading a book entitled, “Who Do You Say That I Am: Christology and Identity in the United Church of Christ”. The word ‘Christology’ is the theological term for exploring the person and nature of Jesus Christ. The title of the book - Who Do You Say That I Am, refers to the question Jesus asked his disciples in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

The opening sentence of the book’s introduction reads, “Talking about Christology in the United Church of Christ is akin to wrestling with an octopus.” This points to the fact that within the UCC, and, indeed, within the Church universal there are many different answers to that question. And I would bet that if I was to sit down with each of you individually and ask that question, I would hear a number of different answers. That is not a bad thing. Jesus is one of the most unique and complex figures in human history. There are many ways of describing our relationship to him. But I’m not going to go into all that right now, but, instead, suggest that the same can be said about the meaning of baptism, although, perhaps to a lesser degree. Although I might suggest that our ideas about the nature of Jesus Christ are related to how we interpret baptism.

In the Great Commission the disciples receive from the Risen Lord these instructions , “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...”. But how do we understand the meaning of baptism? Perhaps, the dominate answer is found in today’s reading where Paul asks the church in Rome, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” This means that when we are baptized, we participate in the death of Jesus, and that there is a form of death that takes place in us. A dramatic explanation of this is found in the baptismal practice in some African churches. As the priest submerges the person being baptized, he says, “I kill you in the name of Jesus”. But as the person is lifted out of the water, he says, “I raise you up in the name of Christ”. In other words, when we are baptized, we participate in the death of Jesus, but we also participate in his resurrection!

To say that there is a death that takes place within us is to say that we are no longer under the power of sin and death. To say that we participate in Jesus’ resurrection is to say that we are reborn to newness of life.

We do not submerge people here when we baptize. We pour or sprinkle the water on the person being baptized, but the meaning here is similar. It symbolizes the washing away of sin.

We can let go of the feelings of guilt we may have over things we may have done in the past, and we are empowered to overcome sin in our life ahead.

This, of course, refers to what we call believers baptism, that is, the baptism of those who are old enough to understand its meaning, and who both make confession of sin and confession of faith. This is in contrast to infant baptism in which a baby is incorporated into the Body of Christ, to which we take upon ourselves the responsibility of raising and supporting the child in the faith, until he or she is old enough to confirm their own baptism.

Another dimension of baptism has to do with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist performed a baptism of repentance, i.e., baptism for the forgiveness of sin. But he also said that the Messiah would baptize with water and with fire. The fire can be interpreted as the Holy Spirit, as we see in the day of Pentecost when tongues like fire descend upon those in the Upper Room. Some churches see this as taking place at the same time as the baptism of water. This is symbolized in the Roman Catholic Church when after baptizing with water the priest dips his thumb in oil and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one being baptized. Other churches, such as charismatic and Pentecostal churches see it as something that takes place separately from water baptism. Whichever way it is perceived it all points to empowerment into newness of life.

And, no matter how it is performed it is a onetime thing. As it says in the Book of Ephesians, there is "one baptism". The World Council of Churches is quite adamant about that. For example, if someone who was baptized and raised in the Roman Catholic Church was to come here and ask to become a member of our church, there is no need to re-baptize that person. There is "one baptism" - baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That is important from an ecumenical point of view. Whether we recognize it or not, and whether we call ourselves Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, we were all baptized into the one church - the Body of Christ. It is a shame that after centuries of divisions within the Body we fail to recognize that fact. It is sad and a pity that with so many different manifestations of the Christian faith that we fail to see that there really is only one Church.

These are just a few of the different dimensions of baptism in which we are raised up into newness of life. This does not mean that we will never again commit a sinful act. As Martin Luther once pointed out, throughout our lives we are simultaneously both sinner and saint, but through the grace of God, the mercies of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to overcome through repentance, and walk in newness of life. Amen.

Let us pray: O God, we are made glad by the good news of your love for us and for all. We thank you for Creating us and giving us everything that is necessary for life. We thank you for your action in Christ by which our lives are measured, found wanting, and through your grace are renewed to newness of life. Help us to remember your gifts that we may praise you with lives of joy and service; through Jesus Christ our Lord...Amen.