

# Symbols and Sacraments

Matthew 28: 18-20

Symbols and sacraments fill religious life. They point us to the sacred dimension of life and, in some circumstances, enable us to connect with the holy. Other kinds of symbols fill our lives as well. On this Independence Day weekend, the power and perhaps sacramental nature of these symbols can present a challenge to Christian people.

Today I am beginning a series called "Ask Jack" because the sermon topics are responses to the questions you have asked and the topics you have suggested. Today's topic concerns the symbol and the sacrament of baptism. The question comes in three parts: "How does Jesus' example of baptism relate to the modern church?" "Why don't we offer baptism more openly?" "Is baptism a requirement for salvation?"

Baptism came out of a Jewish tradition. It was a powerful symbol in Jesus' time as it is in ours. The word "baptism" is a transliteration of the Greek word meaning simply "a rite using water". From the earliest days of the Followers of the Way of Jesus, baptism was a rite symbolizing entry into the Christian community.

Is baptism a requirement for salvation? The simple answer is "No". The New Testament tells us: "For by grace are you saved through faith, not by works...." (Eph. 2:8) Baptism is a sign of our commitment to God's love and the transformation that is taking place in our lives through the Holy Spirit, but the act of baptism is not a prerequisite for that salvation.

What is baptism? Immersion? Sprinkling? What about children? Is it okay for them to be baptized? You will get different answers from different branches of the Christian Church. Reaction by groups like the Baptists to infant baptism came from the abuses of that practice in the pursuit of political power. Baptism is a symbol. Far more important than the way that symbol is depicted is the meaning it has.

What does baptism mean? Again, listen to the New Testament:

- 1 Cor. 12: 12-13 – Baptism is a means of incorporation into the Christian community (body of Christ) – all dividing barriers are overcome.
- Gal. 3: 26-29 highlights the connection of baptism with faith and being God's children. Baptism is "putting on Christ" like putting on clothing.
- Romans 6: 1-4 – Baptism is symbolic of dying with Christ and being resurrected to a new kind (a new quality) of life.

"Why don't we offer baptism more openly?" What does this question mean to you? The implication is that we don't offer baptism very openly? What would it look like for us to offer baptism more openly? Of course, there is no baptismal tank in our current facility. Maybe that's something that needs to be part of our new space. Perhaps it means there is a need for discipleship classes for older children and youth that lead naturally to baptism? It may well mean that we, as a congregation, need to reach more people who have not already been baptized? I think that's right. In addition to people looking for a church, we will need to look for people who need a church home/

Baptism is a symbol and also a sacrament. (read Matthew 28: 18-20) According to Matthew's gospel, this is the one resurrection appearance, as opposed to several in Luke's gospel. There is no ascension of Jesus. He is with them, always coming to his church. For Matthew, then, this may be seen as Jesus' second coming.

He promises to be with his followers throughout this present age. We believe that Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, is with his followers today. Jesus is the turning point in salvation history and all who follow him are translated into a new age, free of old barriers of nation, race, and the requirements of the Mosaic Law.

Baptism is the symbol for discipleship in this new age! You'll note that there is a close connection between baptism and the proclaimed word of the gospel. Baptism is essentially a statement of faith. It is a testimony to all about the commitment of a person's life.

Baptism is a moment in the Christian community when we recognize the grace of God living in all creation. It is a moment when God offers us the possibility of transformation. It is a continuing process of renewal of body, mind, and spirit.

Baptism is an act of naming and knowing one's identity within the community and individually before God. It is a recommitment of a creation with its Creator; a bond of love. It is a symbol of the love by which God reaches out to us. It is a symbol of the baptism of the Holy Spirit from God.

Baptism is more than a symbol. It is also a sacrament. Marcus Borg defines sacrament as, "a finite, physical, visible mediator of the sacred" -- "a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us" -- "an outward and visible sign" that gets us in touch with God's grace - and a door or bridge to the sacred.

A sacrament is a physical action that becomes a means for us to experience God's grace, God's love, and God's presence. Understood as sacrament, baptism means participating in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is the commission of the church to share the gospel (good news) of Jesus. In baptism, we live into Jesus' teachings summarized in love of God and love of neighbor. In baptism, we participate in the Jesus' response to fear. We move through our own fear by the power of faith in God revealed to us in Jesus.

There are other symbols that exercise power in our lives. On this Independence Day weekend, national symbols are particularly present: the flag, patriotic songs, and the general theme of patriotism. At this time of national division over policies ranging from economics to the "War on Terror," symbols of patriotism can be divisive especially for people of faith.

What do they symbolize for us? What do these symbols call from us? What is a healthy approach to patriotism and patriotic action? What is unhealthy patriotism? What does all this mean for us as Christians?

What does the flag represent to you? What about singing a patriotic song? To me, they are positive symbols of respect and love for the ideals of the United States that are expressed in our founding documents. They symbolize the ongoing struggle for liberty, opportunity, and freedom for all people. They do not represent a blanket approval of any policy of our government.

In recent years, many religious and political conservatives in our society have begun to assert their opinions on policy, both foreign and domestic, as identical to God's will. Former Missouri Senator John Danforth criticizes, in strong language, the divisiveness such political and religious certitude has brought to the U. S. Congress and to our society as a whole. He suggests that our priorities for patriotism begin with the recognition of what we don't know. No one can be certain. Danforth, who is now an Episcopal priest, urges all Christians, all people of faith, and all patriots to focus on Jesus' priorities of love for God and for neighbor. In practice, this means tolerance for each other and our different views.

Conservative columnist George Will speaks this word of truth:  
America is currently awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes. That is why there is a rhetoric of bitterness absurdly disproportionate to our real differences. It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure that you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate – even to savor – the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves.

In the heat of today's political fervor, symbols of patriotism often begin to function as a type of sacrament in a religion of American nationalism. Ardent nationalism becomes confused with genuine religious faith when it sees approval of national policies as the ultimate test of faith.

It is good to feel proud when pledging allegiance to flag. On NPR, I had the opportunity to hear the original version of the Pledge of Allegiance, before fear of unchecked immigration or of Godless communism brought additions to the language. It read, "I pledge allegiance to my flag and to the republic for which it stands; one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

When singing the *Star Spangled Banner* or *America the Beautiful*, I reminded of hopes and ideals. In what I consider the true spirit of patriotism, I am also reminded of the ways we have failed to live up to those ideals. It is good to feel uneasy with words that praise actions in the past, present, or future that have been destructive to other cultures and races. It is important to reject any claim that this nation has God's exclusive blessing on actions of policy. Being a patriot means to seek God's blessing by seeking justice, peace, liberty for all people.

Let us dedicate ourselves, as citizens of the United States, to the work of justice and peace for every person. When we do, we will be cooperating with the will of God, under whom we claim to live as a nation. We are one nation under God, not the one nation representing God or speaking for God or synonymous with God

I am proud to be an American; proud of many of the things America has done. I am also ashamed of many of the things America has done and has represented. We have a responsibility as citizens to work to shape our future in the direction of liberty and justice for all. We recognize American Independence Day and sing a patriotic song to remind us to move our nation away from perpetuating violence and exploiting the world's people and resources for selfish national interests.

Being patriotic is a small piece of who we are. We express the life of God. We are children of God. That's the main thing. We live in the reality of God's new creation as it is coming into existence. Baptism is the symbol of this existence.

As you celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, wave your flag if you want. Sing the songs of our nation. Be proud and also be ashamed. Be humble and be aware. Let this be our prayer for our nation and for ourselves:

*May the Lord bless us, but not bless all that we plan to do*

*and keep us, but not always keep us comfortable*

*May the Lord lift up his countenance upon us*

*Causing us to look inward and see the truth*

*And give us peace, not tranquility, but the courage to act according to the teachings of Jesus and the promptings of the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen.*