



“Baptism by Water and Fire”

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John 1:29–42 (NRSV)***

Today we join Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Western European Protestants in reading and reflecting on the meaning of Christ’s baptism and our baptisms. Most Christians are reflecting on baptism with water today, and some on baptism by fire. I will say more about baptism by fire in a moment, but first—baptism with water.

Historically speaking, Christians have spent way too much time, in my view, arguing about the correct age and amount of water to use for baptism and the signs of baptism by fire, and too little time reflecting on the meaning of baptism.

Even a cursory study of Christian history reveals that arguments about the sacraments have played a huge role in how Christians have defined denominational and political boundaries. For example, the lines of demarcation between Massachusetts and Rhode Island during colonial times were substantially influenced by their leaders’ beliefs about baptism. There was no such thing as separation of church and state when Massachusetts and Rhode Island were colonies of Britain. Remember, for example, that our Pilgrim ancestors came to this continent to establish “a city on a hill and a light to the nations,” as described in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. And that Puritans’ progeny chased the Baptists out of Boston, and sent them fleeing to Rhode Island.

II

Let’s take a quick look at some of the practical and theological differences regarding baptism and how they are played out in our time.

Many (but not all of us) at Eden Church have been baptized with water—some with a little water and some with a lot. The amount of water used depends on the denominational tradition in which we were baptized.

If we’ve been baptized, some of us were baptized as infants, some as youth, and some others as adults. Our age at baptism is often related to the tradition in which we were raised and the degree to which our parents influenced our religious formation.

Some of us were baptized in a special service set aside for the occasion when the only person who was being baptized was us, or when the only purpose of the worship service that we were part of was baptism. In these cases, the only other persons who attended these services were our own close family members and friends, or those of other baptismal candidates.

Any of us who may have been baptized in an emergency situation, either because there was a question about our survival or our mother's survival, might have only been surrounded by a pastor or priest or a nurse who performed the ceremony based on our own or a family member's request.

Some of us, by comparison, have not been baptized because we were raised by parents who left decisions about baptism to us. Some have not been baptized because we came into this church from traditions that did not practice baptism, such as the Quakers, or from traditions that only baptized a select few, like the Jehovah's Witnesses. Others have not been baptized because we have come to Christianity recently and are not yet sure that we would like to receive this sacrament for ourselves.

In the United Church of Christ, the denomination with which Eden Church is affiliated, three of the four traditions that merged to form our union were very skimpy with the amount of water they used at baptisms, and one was not. Three of the four emphasized the baptism of infants, while the fourth taught that baptismal candidates had to be old enough to profess the faith to receive the sacrament. So there's quite a range of practices even within our UCC tradition. The embrace of these diverse beliefs and practices of baptism is a characteristic that makes us unique among Christian denominations in the world.

At Eden Church we baptize people at every age from infancy through the end of life. We typically use an amount of water that can be poured into the baptismal font, but we're not beyond using more. We normally baptize people during a Sunday morning worship service, because we believe that every member of the congregation is the candidate's baptismal sponsors; but in an emergency we celebrate baptism at other times and in other contexts with fewer people involved.

Regardless of when and whether you have been baptized, regardless of where your baptism was held or how much water and how many people were involved, you're welcome here, and we think no less or no more of you regardless of your baptismal story. This is because we view the sacraments as sacred acts. They are acts that we participate in for our spiritual nourishment, not for the sake of our salvation. We participate in these acts to experience a taste of heaven here on earth, not to determine who is going to heaven and who is not.

III

OK, that's my *Cliff's Notes* explanation of baptism with water. Now let's talk about baptism by fire. Like baptism with water, baptism by fire means many different things historically and cross-culturally within Christianity and popular culture.

Throughout the history of Christianity, baptism by fire has referred to everything from an anticipated experience of hell in the afterlife to an experience of sanctification in this life, and more.

In biblical times, baptism by fire often referred to the martyrdom of the saints—many of whom were burned at the stake or who suffered various tortures before their deaths. Describing their suffering as baptism by fire was a way for early Christians to describe their belief that God was present in the midst of faithful people's suffering.

Baptism by fire has also been used to describe the imagined belief that the unfaithful will either be consumed by the fires of hell in the afterlife, or that they will go through a refining process in hell before ascending to purgatory and possibly heaven. Whether one ascends, in the views of those who believe in this sort of architecture of heaven and hell, depends on the degrees of one's earthly offenses, the prayers and offerings of survivors, and the grace of God.

Many churches, historically and to this day, have taught and do teach that there is hellfire and damnation awaiting the unrepentant in the afterlife. Eden Church is not one of them. Here, we tend to talk more about hell as a reality that we create for ourselves and other people in this life, rather than as a phenomenon awaiting us or others in the afterlife.

Pentecostal traditions have yet another understanding of baptism by fire, which is sometimes described as "sanctification." Baptism by fire, or sanctification, is a special blessing that only the more devout receive. In order to be a pastor or deacon in Pentecostal traditions, one must be sanctified, and that sanctification must be affirmed by other church leaders. Some marks of sanctification in Pentecostal traditions include the gifts of speaking in tongues and healing touch.

Sanctification is not part of the traditions that I grew up with, but there are other people around Eden Church with experience in Pentecostal traditions who are reliable resources if this topic interests you. They include Pedro Ramos-Goycolea, our MIT; Pastor Carolyn Candies, pastor of Refugee Center Baptist Church, which meets in Pioneer Chapel on Sunday afternoons; and the Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder, pastor of our sister congregation, City of Refuge UCC, in San Francisco.

In my experience, and in our time, the type of baptism by fire with which I am most familiar and find most meaningful has to do with a Christian's work for justice, such as Dr. King and modern Christians' work for African-American Civil Rights in this country

and other justice around the world. This modern form of baptism by fire is most akin to the experiences of the biblical prophets and apostles and the early church martyrs.

VI

Regardless of our beliefs and experiences about baptism with water or baptism by fire, **baptismal invitations and certificates should come with warning labels.** These labels should state in giant, bold letters, “Caveat emptor!” (“Buyer beware!”)

Here’s why: if we take our baptisms seriously, we, like Jesus, will take risks that others will not take. We will move among people with whom others will not associate. And we will challenge the principalities and powers in ways that others would not even consider.

For example, Dr. King and other African American Civil Rights workers whom we honor this weekend and next month are persons who were baptized by water *and* fire. I say baptized by water and fire because Dr. King himself and many of the leaders in this movement were Christians who were motivated by their faith and suffered mightily on account of their witness.

In a day and a time when the role of many Christians on the national scene scares and embarrasses us, we ought to be proud of the distinguished role that the Rev. Dr. King—a Christian pastor—and his followers played in one of the most profound movements in our nation’s history. Moreover, we ought to remember and draw strength from the profound witness that many “everyday Christians” exhibited throughout the Civil Rights Movement—people whose names we will never know, and whose sacrifices will never be documented in our history books.

There are many occasions in the history of the African-American Civil Rights Movement that illustrate the courageous contributions of our forebears in the faith. I’ve chosen one story that is emblematic of many. Most of you know the story too. It’s the story of Bloody Sunday, and it goes like this:

On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, some 600 civil rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Route 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas, and drove them back into Selma.

Two days later, on March 9, Martin Luther King, Jr., led a "symbolic" march to the bridge. Then civil rights leaders sought court protection for a third, full-scale march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery.

Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., weighed the right of the public’s mobility against the right to march and ruled in favor of the demonstrators. "The law is clear that the right to petition one's government for the redress of grievances may be exercised in large groups . . ." said Judge

Johnson, "and these rights may be exercised by marching, even along public highways."

On Sunday, March 21, about 3,200 marchers set out for Montgomery, walking 12 miles a day and sleeping in fields. By the time they reached the capitol on Thursday, March 25, they were 25,000 strong. Less than five months after the last of the three marches, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the best possible redress of grievances.¹

V

Now flash forward to 2011 and the 82nd anniversary of Dr. King's birth. A lot of water has gone under the bridge, so to speak. A lot of progress has been made towards the achievement of civil rights for people of color and other disenfranchised groups in our nation—and much more is needed. People of color continue to experience huge inequities relative to persons of European descent, and there are still numerous bridges to cross in our communities and nation to ensure equality and justice for all.

One of the bridges in our community that needs crossing *over* is the Supervisor's bridge located just west of our campus. This bridge stretches over the San Lorenzo Creek and connects Eden Church to the rest of Cherryland. Another bridge that we need to cross *under* is the I-238 overpass on Mission Boulevard which leads into Ashland.

About two-thirds of our congregation lives northeast of our campus—including Stephanie and I—so that it is possible for some (if not most of us) in our congregation to rarely cross over or under these bridges, and to theoretically live separate lives from our neighbors on the other side of these bridges.

The same could be said of our neighbors to the west and to the north. Many live and work on the west side of Mission Boulevard or on the north side of the I-238 overpass, and they rarely venture east or south as far as our campus.

Some on both sides of these bridges—including members of our church—choose to live differently, however. They and we go back and forth, over and under these bridges, many times a week, and they and we know a lot about life on both sides of the bridges. Consequently, they and we are, and can continue to be, a great resource to our church and our community, because they and we have experiences and skills that can help us continue to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors in the African-American Civil Rights Movement by continuing to work for equality and justice for all—right here in our own church neighborhood.

Several stories that reflect our congregation's walk over the Supervisor's Bridge and under the I-238 overpass could be cited to illustrate the long march of our Eden Church forebears to build relationships with our neighbors who aren't members of the church

¹ <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/civilrights/al4.htm>

and to strengthen our wider community. I'll briefly cite a few recent events. They include our meeting with Cherryland Elementary School Parents and Administration, the School Board Candidates' Forum for the Hayward Unified School District held last fall, and the Three Kings Day party that we hosted on January 8, 2011.

Consider the progress that we've made just in four months. When I introduced myself at a Cherryland Elementary School parent-administrator meeting last September, hardly any of the parents knew who I was or where Eden Church was located.

At the Candidates' Forum that we hosted in Oliver Hall in October, we had to send flaggers to the corner of Mission and Grove to wave people over the bridge and into our parking lot. The event started 20 minutes late because so few people—including most of the School Board candidates—knew where we were located.

Last Saturday, by contrast, when we hosted the Three Kings Day celebration, everyone who attended knew who we were and where we were located. Nobody had trouble finding us. We were the church located just over the bridge that cares about Cherryland children. The adults who were here had all been to Eden Church before, or they knew someone who had attended a community event on our campus.

The inequities that continue to exist in our county and nation—particularly in Cherryland and Ashland—are graphically illustrated in the proficiency ratings of our public schools and the US Census data. There is much to overcome. There are no simple solutions. But remembering that we were called and claimed by our baptisms to be instruments of God's love and justice, and daring to cross over and under the bridges that our ancestors traveled are steps in the right direction. So, then, in the spirit of Epiphany, I say to all of us: let's remember our baptism, and take another step. Amen.