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"Understanding Baptism and Communion"  
Isaiah 42: 1-9, Matthew 3: 13-17

Christian churches all around the world are filled with fascinating and interesting differences. Those differences reveal themselves as you look at one denomination and then another or as you look from one culture to another. Many things are different from one church to another, but there are two things which are almost universal in the Christian church in every land, in every denomination, in every era - preaching and an offering. Well, no that really isn't it though it may seem so at times. Universally in Christian teaching and experience in almost every land and denomination, Christians practice the two sacraments of baptism and communion. Today is the day, which comes around annually, when we read the story of Jesus' baptism. And it is also a day which we receive Holy Communion, so it is a good day for us to be reminded of these very fundamental and universal aspects, acts, rites, sacraments of the Christian faith. Let's think about what it means that we have these traditions of baptism and the table with virtually every Christian around the world.

Perhaps you have noticed, but sometimes it's one of those things that is so familiar that we don't see it, and that is that these two sacraments of the Christian faith remind us that in some very fundamental deep ways that Christianity is a family. For you see, what we really have here in baptism and communion is a bath and dinner. That's what they are - they are a bath and dinner. Things we do in our homes and families. They are sacraments that represent and act out for us this reality that people who are in Jesus Christ are family to each other. So, at the very core of our faith, we have these intimate family things - we have a bath and we have dinner as a part of the most basic shared experiences of Christians.

Baptism - the warm bath. Well, it may not seem so warm if you've been baptized recently or had a child that came to baptism. The cold water can seem very cold when it hits your head, but there is a sense in which baptism is indeed a warm bath. For it is a bath of God's gracious love and mercy. Love and mercy are never cold. They are always warm, soothing, tender. For baptism at its heart is really a bath. Baptism takes its root, of course, in Jewish practice in Jesus' time of the ritual bath. Faithful Jewish people always had a ritual bath prior to worship. In the homes of the wealthy and in the synagogues of Israel there were these little spas called *mitzvahs*. Archaeologists find them all over the holy land. In these *mitzvahs* people immersed themselves for a ritual cleansing before they would go to worship God. John the Baptist practiced this custom of baptizing people in water, but he didn't invent it. It was something that was deeply rooted in Jewish practice in his own time, although generally it didn't take place in a dirty, old river. But all of these immersions, these baths, were meant to represent the process of being made clean.

Christianity incorporated this ritual bath, but shifted its frequency. In Jewish practice at that time, the bath was something people did in order to cleanse themselves to prepare for worship and they did it over and over again. But in the Christian faith, baptism became not something that people do to cleanse themselves, but rather a celebration and a witness to what God has done in God's mercy to make us clean. Baptism isn't our doing. It is God's doing. Baptism represents the great mercy and cleansing, the warm love of God that we experience in Jesus Christ. It is the warm bath of God's mercy, but it is more than that.

It is also, particularly for Protestant Christians, a kind of lay ordination. We think of ordination as something that clergy experience or that priests have. People are ordained to be a pastor or priests. But in the Christian faith, everyone within the Christian family is understood to be a minister of Christ. There are some churches that on their bulletin or on their masthead have a phrase declaring: "Ministers - All the Members" and then it will say "Clergy" and it will list the ordained folk that serve

in that church. When churches do that they are trying to communicate and to teach the lesson that baptism is the laity's ordination to their ministry. It is the mark of Christ put upon us giving us our identity. That's why in those little poetic verses that I use on Communion Sundays, I say this is the fountain from which our identity flows. It tells us who we are. We are the people that have been claimed by Jesus Christ. Whether we want to submit to the claim, whether we are alert to it, awake to it, or acknowledge it; nevertheless our baptism cleanses us and it marks us.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest and, perhaps, the best writer of sermons in our time. In her book "The Preaching Life" she says this about baptism:

"I have often wondered whether the church would be even smaller than it is if that cross of baptism were made not with water but with permanent ink—a nice deep purple, perhaps—so that who bore Christ's mark bore it openly, visibly, for the rest of their lives."\*

That's what baptism is meant to be - the mark of Christ upon us for the rest of our lives signifying God's mercy and love that claims us. It's a warm bath in that regard, but also it is a brand. A branding upon us, making us who we are. Identifying to whom we belong. Signifying that we have come into this family of Christ that shapes us, that shapes our identity. Therefore, because baptism is the bath of God's cleansing mercy and also God's brand on our identity, in the Christian faith, baptism, unlike the baths at our homes, baptism only happens once. Once branded, once cleansed, always branded. Baptism, as much as it is a homelike bathing, is a once in our life event.

There are these two things that are universal in Christianity - the warm bath and the dinner table. If the branding of baptism is a once in a lifetime act, communion is the repeated act nourishing our identity in Jesus Christ. Communion Teaches us over and over and over and over again, as we come to the table, lessons about God's abundance, God's love, God's nourishment, God's mercies. Just as we are identified once, we are nourished in that identity over and over and over again. Our identity is that we are brothers and sisters of one another in Jesus Christ. There may be someone within this room with whom you disagree. Heavens, such a thought! There might be someone in this room that votes differently than you do. Heavens, such a thought! There may be someone in this room that makes a lot more or a lot less money than you do. Heavens such a thought! But when we are together at this table, we're all the same. We're children of God and brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We're all the same. We are all people that come needing to be nurtured and encouraged and fed in our faith. We're all the same. At this table, we all receive the same great nourishment.

The table is not only a table of nourishment. It is also the table of hope. We Christians believe that what we experience in communion is but a hint, a sign, a suggestion, an example of what will one day be universal and total. My goodness, in our divided world, in our conflicted communities, in our fractured families, we know the unity of communion is a rare thing. We know that communion is an ideal, it is a hoped for dream that is not experienced in the "real" world. But communion, for Christians, is the promise that God in Jesus Christ will one day make a table where we will all—all around the world—will be sisters and brothers. God will one day make a table where all God's children of all races and all nations and all languages and all socioeconomic groups and all educational statuses will feast in peace and harmony. One day there will be a table of peace and unity for all creation. This dinner table is a table of hope, a table that anticipates, a table that reminds us of what we have to look forward to in Christ. Ah, family. Welcome home to the place, the warm bath and a family table. Amen.

\* Taylor, Barbara Brown; The Preaching Life, p. 30