



Dam up the Detroit River

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord, January 13, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; and Matthew 3:13-17.

The visit of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and the wedding feast at Cana, which we have in Year C, form a triptych for what the Prayer Book calls, “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles” (p. 31). They are seasons of light.

In Matthew, the baptism of Jesus has distinctive characteristics. Matthew stresses the *public* character of the baptism, and portrays it as an *inaugural commissioning*. Early Christian interpreters quickly came to view the baptism of Jesus as prefiguring their own baptism because of Jesus’ final mandate to his disciples to “baptize all nations.”

A Sunday school teacher, trying to teach the meaning of baptism, asked her class, “Can anyone tell me what you must do to obtain forgiveness of sin?” There was a long silence, and then a small voice piped up from the back of the room, “You have to sin?” Smart child! The church specializes in forgiveness. Anyone can visit those in prison and people do, anyone can care for the sick, anyone can feed the hungry. Rock musicians do it better than we do. The one thing the church can do that no one else can do is forgive sins.

The celebration of Epiphany is intended to highlight the *globalization* of the gospel. In the reading from the Book of Acts we have a rare glimpse of the way in which baptism came to be understood in the earliest days of the church. This reading from Acts is appointed for the Baptism of Our Lord every year in our three year cycle, and it is appointed for Easter Day each and every year as well. I call that to your attention because some passages in scripture never appear in the lectionary at all. Some appear once every three years. But this passage from the Acts of the Apostles is so central and so fundamental to our faith formation it is provided twice a year every year. You can almost hear the framers of the lectionary saying “Listen up!”

This passage also provides a lens through which to think about a question that has been surfacing with increasing frequency in the life of the church. For a long time parishes included a statement in the bulletin that said something like “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive communion.”

Those of you over fifty may remember a time when the only people welcome to receive communion were those who had been confirmed with the laying on of hands by a bishop in apostolic succession. What most of us did not realize at the time is it had the effect of “ex-communicating” baptized Christians of most other denominations, as well as children who had not yet been confirmed. That began to change in 1970 as part of the recovery of our baptismal theology. After years of study and discussion, we came to the conclusion that baptism was the sacrament of full Christian initiation. It was not “completed” by confirmation. There are no second-class citizens in the Body of Christ. All

baptized persons are full members of the Body of Christ. As a result, the General Convention in 1970 recommended that all baptized Christians be admitted to communion. In 1985 The International Anglican Consultation on Children and Communion recommended “That since baptism is the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the church, all baptized persons be admitted to communion.” It has now been more than twenty years since we discontinued the practice of “ex-communicating” small children and Christians of other denominations.

For some years the words “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive communion” were printed in parish bulletins, to clarify our practice, and to signal hospitality and welcome to other Christians. Over the past thirty years and more the world has changed however, and we are now wrestling with a *new* question. The new question is, “Does this mean that *unbaptized* persons are *unwelcome to receive communion*? Thirty years ago we did not foresee a day when there would *be* unbaptized people in the pews. The canons, which did not anticipate such a development, say, “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.” Today, however, many adults were not baptized as children and the baptism of adults has become more common, as has their presence and participation in worship.

Today this is a topic of discussion in the larger church. Those who want to maintain the current practice say that if baptism is the sacrament of initiation, then we would undermine its meaning and purpose if we eliminated this canon. Communion should be restricted to those who already have been baptized. On the other side of the aisle, the argument is that there is no biblical warrant for refusing communion to the unbaptized. The table is Christ’s table, not our table. Jesus did not require his followers to be baptized, and he did not exclude people from the fellowship of his table. If Communion is the sacrament by which the Holy Spirit is *now* calling new members into the household of faith, who are we to refuse them? And then, there is a more pragmatic issue. For better or worse, we just do not “card” people at the communion rail.

It seems to me the Book of Acts sheds some light on this question. Soon after Pentecost, we begin to see the spread of the gospel. In a short period of time, it moves through the Mediterranean world like wild fire. In the Book of Acts, the first to embrace the gospel appear to have been Jews, but almost immediately the gospel spreads beyond that first community in Jerusalem. Philip preaches to the Samaritans who accepted the word of God, and Peter and John are sent to them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Philip, traveling from Jerusalem to Gaza encounters the Ethiopian eunuch, who takes him up into his chariot to discuss the scriptures, and asks Philip to baptize him. These are bewildering encounters since the first Christians believed that one must be a Jew to become a Christian. So, what were they to do with these various Gentiles?

Then, Peter has a vision in which he hears the words, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This message is repeated three times, leaving Peter to puzzle over its meaning. As he puzzles over the meaning of this vision, Cornelius, a Roman Centurion and a Gentile, is told by a similar divine voice to send to Joppa for a man called Simon, which he does. Peter responds to the summons, he visits the household of Cornelius in Caesarea, and in that encounter Peter and Cornelius each have an epiphany, and each realizes that they were called together by God for a reason. Peter then says to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; (referring to himself and his summons to their home,) but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

This is an “Ah- hah!” moment for Simon Peter – a moment when the light bulb goes on. In the words of today’s passage he says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every

nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). And as he speaks, the Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and those of his household.

Cornelius is the first Gentile convert in the Book of Acts, and what happened here mirrors what happened at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles. This struggle with whether or not to admit the Gentiles is finally resolved once and for all at the first church council recorded in the 15th chapter of Acts.

Does this have anything to say to the dilemma before us today? If God shows no partiality, if the Holy Spirit blows where the Spirit will independent of baptism, can we continue to justify barring unbaptized persons from communion? In today’s church is the statement, “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive communion” a statement of hospitality and invitation or one of inhospitality and exclusion? Does it convey the Good News of God in Christ?

I have been wrong from time to time, I have been wrong any number of times, and I make no claim to know with *certainty* the mind of God, however if I am going to err one way or another, I would rather risk giving communion to an unbaptized person, than turn away someone the Spirit may be calling to faith. Today there are a growing number of parishes that actively welcome anyone who wishes to receive even as others argue for the necessity of baptism. It may be a while before we know whether or not the church is again acting its way into new ways of thinking. In our passage from Isaiah, the Lord says, “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare...” (Isaiah 42:9) Only time will tell whether this is one of those new things.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Julia Mae. One of my favorite definitions of baptism is that in baptism we are given permission to make mistakes. So just think of all the mistakes she can make! Someone once said, “A mistake is clear evidence that someone tried to do something.” My hope that Julia will try her hand at all kinds of things – that she will venture forth into the world in the sure and certain knowledge that whenever she sins she can repent and return to the Lord. The prayer book doesn’t say if we sin you’ll note, it says “when.” When we sin – we can come back as many times as it takes, and now Julia can too.

In the meantime, we continue to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. We baptize children and we baptize adults. We baptize on riverbanks, in churches, in hospitals, in kitchen sinks, and in swimming pools. We baptize in neonatal units and we baptize on deathbeds. Some baptisms are done by clergy and some by laity. Some happen with great pomp and circumstance, and some happen with great secrecy where to be a Christian is punishable by death even in the 21st century. We pour, we sprinkle, we immerse. The one constant is that we baptize with water in the name of the Trinity.

Now for a story. There was a machinist with Ford Motor Company who had borrowed, over a period of years, some tools and other automobile parts. Although clearly frowned upon, everybody did it, and management had been silent on the matter.

One day, however, the machinist was baptized and he took his baptism very seriously as new converts sometimes do. He was so filled with the Spirit that the day after his baptism, he gathered up all the tools he had collected over the years, loaded them into his pickup, took them to the plant and presented them to a startled foreman with his confession and his request for forgiveness.

The foreman was so overcome by his honesty that he cabled Henry Ford, who was out of the country. Ford immediately cabled back: "Dam up the Detroit River and baptize the entire plant!"

To close, Isaiah says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." Today it is Julia Mae that the Spirit has chosen and in whom God delights. These same words are true for every newly baptized Christian; and thanks be to God, they are true for each and every one of us. We are those in whom God delights.