

When I was growing up everyone I knew was baptized or assumed to be baptized. Most of us are infants. Wollaston/Whiskey story. Today, I don't really know, but I sense it isn't taken for granted.

The Sunday after Christmas, this recently past Christmas, I was privileged to perform the Baptism of Violet Pulaski – Ben & Kerri Pulaski's second child. I was doing it in conjunction with the Pastor of the church Ben and Kerri are attending. It was a little bit of a throw back for me as the Pastor was very clear about who the 'real' Pastor was and who was doing the Baptism. I was disappointed that I would not be holding Violet as she was blessed. I had a smallish speaking part, but as the ceremony was underway the Pastor whispered to me "why don't you do the Holy Spirit part?". I was happy to have a physical part. Kerri was holding Violet as the Pastor and I drizzled water over her head and spoke those ancient words. Something happened to me as I finished 'in the name of the HS who gives you life afresh everyday' I picked Violet up and held her and said to Ben, 'come on' and we carried her down the aisle as she looked in wonder at the smiling faces beaming at her. It was no big deal but the tactile bit of it made it feel real to me.

Reading today's scripture, I found myself wishing Jesus had been cradled in Mary's or John's arms as he received the sacrament which, of course, shows the limitations of my ability to conceive of Jesus coming to us not in the beginning of his life, but in a moment of time, in a life that had no beginning or end.

Infant baptism was unheard of in Jesus' time. Baptism is/was considered an affirmation of Christian beliefs – specifically the trinity and Jesus as our savior. In the early church, people were catechumens 'interns' for 3 years before being baptized. But as the church grew, doctrine emerged that baptism was a shield against punishment for unforgiven sins; the church wanted children to be baptized as early as possible. In a time when newborns died at a high rate the rush to early baptism increased. Parents

and priests wanted to protect the newborn from an eternity spent either in hell or in purgatory.

Others believed that baptizing an infant was wrong, was making a decision for the adult they would become without any input from the baptized. I'm sure you know that some denominations refrain from baptism until the individual is at least 13, somewhat mirroring the Jewish coming of age bat mitzvah ceremony. These differences have to do with whether forgiveness is central in the sacrament or if doctrine and belief are its meaning.

The United Church of Christ and many other protestant denominations who practice infant baptism rely on Confirmation as an opportunity for one baptized as an infant to consent to the promises made on their behalf at that baptism. This church found that even at 13, youth were not ready to understand and embrace the baptismal promises and we now confirm youth when they are in 10th or 11th grade.

It is clear to me that Jesus' baptism was neither for the forgiveness of sins nor for him to confirm his beliefs in a Christian doctrine not even formed yet.

I'm not sure what we - the gathered community apart from the clergy, think happens in a baptism. I suspect it ranges from 'welcome to the world', 'God please protect my child'; 'now the child is officially part of the church'; 'a promise to raise your child as a Christian' 'a promise to support the parents in raising their child as a christian'; 'our family has always had their child baptized in this church'; 'my grandmother expects it' and on and on. In any case, I don't think we would characterize baptism with John the Baptist's image of Jesus with a winnowing fork separating the wheat from the chaff; the thought of an unquenchable fire never enters our mind.

And yet, the essence of John's depiction is very much what baptism is about. The winnowing fork was a familiar tool to anyone growing wheat. It was one of the ways a farmer could process his wheat crop so that he would be left with the grain and the husk would be removed. The husk was light and dry

having already performed its function of protecting the grain. When tossing the wheat with a winnowing fork the husk would be carried away in the breeze and the farmer would be left with the grain. The wheat and the chaff are one organism; they are connected and both necessary. Neither is wrong nor bad.

When we think of the winnowing John the Baptist connects to Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit, he is not saying some of you will be good enough for Jesus to baptize and others will burn in unquenchable fire. He is not referring to two different entities, two different people. He is talking about one - a stalk of wheat' He is talking about one person.

You are grain and chaff. We all are. You are essence and shell. Jesus is baptizing the essence and breaking through the shell. Having been claimed by the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit - we are most ourselves, when we are our essence. That is true for me personally. I am my most complete and at peace when I consciously put God in the center of my day. I know this, without doubt or question; so why do I sometimes think 'oh, I'm not going to write in my prayer journal tonight' and think that just picking up the novel or whatever other 'pleasure' reading I'm doing, why do I think that that will be a treat. And the more I do that kind of thing, the further I get from my center, the further I get from God and from the conviction that there is a meaning to life, and there is a meaning to my life.

What happened at my baptism, what happens at baptism, is ongoing. Baptism does not and cannot be repeated, but when we realize we've pulled a protective layer of distraction and separation around us, we need to shed the chaff and expose the grain; we need to listen to our hearts and evaluate whether the things we are filling our lives with feed and fuel our essence or are they forming us in some other mold; are they coming from beyond not from within. By within, I don't mean are they coming from our own desires and comforts, but are they coming from the essence that was touched by God in our baptism; that essence which God places within us.

In the weekly email, we talked about Epiphany meaning the showing or revealing of who Jesus is. In his baptism, we hear who he is as a voice from heaven declares him to be God's beloved son with whom God is well pleased. Those words reveal to us also who God is and who we are to God so that when, at the baptismal font, we cradle a baby in our arms and ask, "what child is this?" We know that God's response is that you are my beloved child and you carry my blessing always. Amen