

“What’s Special About Baptism?”

Sermon January 13, 2008 – Epiphany I

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James’ Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

I’ve told the story before about my children’s first baby-sitter, Mrs. Cleveland, in Lee’s Summit, Mo. I won’t tell you how little we paid Mrs. Cleveland back in the late 50’s, which was only a fraction of what you have to pay for child care these days, but I can tell you why she was always available on Sunday mornings when we needed her. You see, Mrs. Cleveland just didn’t go to church on Sundays. Years ago she had belonged to the Methodist South Church in this small town. But when the Methodist South Church reunited with their northern brethren in 1939 the united church moved into the larger building of the north congregation.

So from that time on, Mrs. Cleveland just never went back to church on Sundays!

That of course, among other things, is a vignette about religious freedom. But somewhere along the line the notion of religious freedom, and the notion of belonging, a need that’s part of our psychological DNA, have gotten mixed up.

Because we were born free to figure out things for ourselves, the idea of living under the umbrella of one creed has yielded to the idea that after all, we built these churches, we’ve defined and refined our versions of what the church should be, and, like Mrs. Cleveland, we can just leave it anytime we please.

The practical result is that there are lots of people walking around who say and think they’re believers, but don’t go to church anymore, if they ever did much after they grew up. Do you know anyone like that?—probably you do.

And I have to say, as one who drifted away from church all through my college years, that’s understandable on many counts. I realize that the church itself is often the reason that a lot of people leave. The church sometimes tries to manipulate and manage its members, or it loses them in its reticence to live up to its own teaching, or it just bores them away.

Nevertheless on the feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, we’re confronted with the promise we made to stay with the church. Or to put it in a better way we declare that we will live by the baptismal covenant that we made or was made for us at our baptisms, and which we renew again this morning as we share in the baptism of Maddy and Riley.

I can remember, and probably many of you do as well, when baptisms were mostly a family affair, done at the convenience of the family, with often a “christening” party afterwards. Now the rite of Baptism in the “new” version of our Book of Common Prayer, adopted almost thirty

years ago, assumes that the service will be public and that there will be congregational participation. That gives each of us the wonderful opportunity to renew our own baptismal covenant, and to say right up front, in front of God and everybody around us, that we promise to “continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” Now, that’s about as good a definition of church that you’re likely to get!

As these young people, their parents and godparents come forward for the rite of baptism this morning they are not alone. All of us join with them, renewing our own promises, and declare by what we do that here is a group of people to belong to and be with, whatever life will bring. We continue to see, feel, hear and touch that connection every Sunday we are here; every time we share in a parish luncheon or dinner or a coffee hour; every time we make our pledge payments; every time we volunteer to help with a project; and every time we recite the Nicene Creed as a member of the church universal. In another Prayer Book phrase, we are “knit together in one communion and fellowship.”

We need that, because we know that we just can’t make it anywhere in life by ourselves. It would be good to remember that when we see that our nation itself is more than usually divided by political unpleasantness these days. It would be good to remember that in a world where the willfulness of human nature never stops causing destruction and war. That’s the world we’ve got and the world we have to live in and work with.

Jesus was born into such a world. And he recognized very early in his ministry that his baptism by John was a gift from God, just as ours is. So today in this service we affirm and strengthen this gift from God in our own lives.

But certainly there is more begun at baptism than is ended, and many, many of us will drift away. One of those people drifting away was Bono, whom we know as the lead singer for the rock group U2. But now we know him for much more than that. I hope you know that among other things Bono has spent months and millions campaigning for churches around the world to become more involved in the fight against AIDS and to support Millennium work to end poverty and disease in Africa. The magazine *Christianity Today* had a feature a few years ago about Bono as an unchurched Christian doing good. He had once been part of a loosely structured Irish fellowship, but now he seldom goes to church. He does pray, he has his favorite bible translation. But he doesn’t want to be pinned down.

“I go where the life is, you know? Where I feel the Holy Spirit,” Bono said. “If it’s in the back of a Roman Catholic cathedral, in the quietness and the incense, which suggest the mystery of God, of God’s presence, or in the bright lights of the revival tent, I just go where I find life. I don’t see denomination. I generally think religion gets in the way of God.”

Well, you don’t have to be Bono to say that. A lot of people say that. I’ve heard variations on that theme from a variety of people for as long as I can remember. And some of those people have made significant contributions to the world.

But what can be missing in this is the “connectedness” to life that I preached about two weeks ago, the connectedness to the Holy Spirit and the mystery of God’s presence that Bono

himself can speak about, and sometimes finds. However, we all know from our own experience that you can't hold onto that by yourself. And if you're not sharing that spiritual connectedness with others it's hard to maintain the balance, solidarity, or any real staying power of faith and practice that we all need in the ups and downs in life.

I can say from my own experience that this connectedness, this staying power of faith and practice is what I needed and what I found when I came back to the church of my childhood. I couldn't name it very well when I came back, but what I discovered was this "company of assorted saints" that we all re-commit ourselves to this morning when we join in affirming our baptismal covenant.

Part of what sustains me as a human being is to know through my baptism that I am never alone. My baptism and yours connects us to an amazing company of people who have, at one level or another, struggled to accept, and then to live a faith that gets them up every morning—but far, far more than that. It's a faith that saves us from being emotional or spiritual castaways who are sometimes relishing our isolation just because we're free to choose it. It's a faith that brings purpose to what we do, strength to see it through, and the capacity to keep on growing and keeping on being surprised by new opportunities that come our way.

It's a faith that sounds remarkably like the prayer we'll pray after this morning's baptisms. It's a prayer that asks that we will be sustained in the Holy Spirit and given an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's work.

Now, I think we can say AMEN! To that!