

June 29, 2016

Church Planting  
*Understanding Baptism*  
Acts 16:11-15

**Opening words:** Once again, we find ourselves in the sixteenth chapter of Acts. Our geographic understanding of the area is thin, so it will have to suffice to say, Paul, Silas and Timothy are in Philippi. That community was a Roman colony, so it was the perfect place for former Roman authorities and soldiers to retire. However, the Jewish population was small. Without an organized synagogue (twelve Jewish males were required to organize a synagogue), Paul's small group goes outside of the city gates to pray. It is while they are there that they meet a woman by the name of Lydia. She was a foreigner herself, from the city of Thyatira. Verse fourteen tells us she was a worshiper of God. What does that mean? That means she believed in both the Jewish understanding of God and the Jewish moral code of the scriptures. However, she had not yet converted to Judaism. That conversion never happened because on that day she accepted Jesus and was baptized into the faith. The story does not end there. Verse fifteen says she and her entire household were baptized that day. Who exactly was baptized on that day? There was Lydia, herself, her husband, their children and some believe, their slaves. Everyone was baptized because of the influence of one person. Can I ask you a question? Do you understand why baptism is so important?

It is important that you know I am a United Methodist by choice and not by birth. I was raised in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That means I was immersed at my baptism, not sprinkled. I was baptized at twelve years old. I never saw an infant baptism until I officiated at one. However, I believe in infant baptism because your baptism welcomes you into the life of the church from the very beginning. Never underestimate the power of Christian influence.

This is sermon number thirty-five in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. Do you remember my goal? I am going to preach through the Book of Acts during the summer months. This is my fourth summer in this spirit-filled book. We find ourselves today in the sixteenth chapter; verses eleven through fifteen. Let me call this message *Understanding Baptism*.

**Acts 16:11-15** From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. <sup>12</sup> From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. <sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her

household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

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Several years ago, Kathryn and I traveled to Ukraine. In the shadows of Russia, Ukraine faces many challenges. Our host Patrick Whaley was planning a baptismal service and was encouraging everyone who had never been baptized to be baptized. I don't know how else to say it. Spiritually, the Ukrainian people seemed confused. They were part of the Soviet Union, so there is a communist hangover. Some Ukrainians believe in nothing. They are working too hard to survive today, so they have no energy left to think about eternity. Some Ukrainians profess to be Orthodox, but they have not practiced their faith in decades. Some Ukrainians have joined cults. When religious freedom came to that land, cults arrived, like Mormonism, and began teaching their false theology. The Protestants, like Methodism, are lumped together. Patrick's baptism service was important because he was simply trying to lead the people back to their Christian core. He was not promoting the United Methodist Church. He was simply promoting Jesus! In the life of the church, nothing matters but Jesus! If you have heard me say that in the past, say, **"Amen!"**

The early church understood the importance of baptism. It is older than the faith itself. Baptism was not created by the early church, but it was redefined by the early church. Baptism began with God's Chosen People. Never forget, the Jews are both a race and a faith. Some were born into the faith. Other non-Jews (Gentiles), were baptized into the Jewish faith. The symbolism was clear. The individual was held under the water to symbolize a washing. It was like taking your Saturday night bath. They were washing away the sins of their old life and starting over again fresh and new. It has been called the sinner's baptism, and this was the baptism that John the Baptist offered. Many left the city and went into the wilderness to be baptized by John. Everyone was encouraged to be baptized because everyone had sinned. Then, Jesus came and threw that movement a curve ball.

Jesus came to be baptized, yet Jesus had never committed a single sin. I do not know why Jesus wanted to be baptized, but his baptism changed everything. Like smashing that champagne bottle on the hull of the new ocean liner, Jesus's earthly ministry began. The rest is history. The early church wanted to be like Jesus, so they baptized new converts. At first it began on Easter morning. Men baptized men, women baptized women. Everyone was in their birthday suits. The symbolism changed. When you were held under the water you were dying with Christ. When you were pulled out of the water you were being resurrected with Christ. We call that form of baptism "immersion" or believer's baptism. How many of you were baptized by immersion? How many of you believe immersion is the only true form of baptism?

Everyone would have been immersed if it wasn't for the Dark Ages. For it was during that horrible time period baptism itself changed. You know it is true. Moms and dads have always loved their children. Parents have always wanted to see their children go

to heaven. The problem was, during the Dark Ages the infant mortality rate was sky high. Parents were afraid their children wouldn't make it into heaven without baptism so they ran their newborns to the church to be baptized, just in case the unthinkable happened. It is for this reason the vast majority of the western church practices infant baptism. It is why we practice infant baptism. How many of you were baptized as an infant? How many of you had your children baptized as infants?

In infant baptism two things happen. First, we wash away the original sin of Adam. Within each newborn is a flaw that leads them to sin. I have never met a perfect person. Does anyone here claim to be perfect? Second, we recognize the importance of environment. Children are not born into isolation. They are born into communities. Part of that community is family. Part of that community is the church. The goal of infant baptism is salvation. We are promising to influence the child toward Jesus, our only hope of salvation. We want the child to wade into the faith gently.

In my time in the ministry, I have baptized both adults and infants. I have immersed and sprinkled. Baptizing an adult is humbling because you can see the Holy Spirit has been working on them. Baptizing an infant is exciting because generations are involved. I have baptized far more infants than I have adults. Infant baptism is our norm, so I want to take some time and examine infant baptism today. I will do that by looking at the ritual we use that is found in the *United Methodist Book of Worship* and by looking at three words. So if you are ready to start, say, "**Amen!**"

### Faith

The first word is *faith*. One of the great stories in the Bible is Jesus's baptism. John is in the wilderness baptizing people in the Jordan. There must have been a sea of sinful faces, which is why the one sinless face stuck out. It was the face of his perfect cousin, Jesus. John believed in Jesus from the very beginning. It is for this reason he was uncomfortable baptizing Jesus. Why would a sinless person need a sinner's baptism? Yet, Jesus is determined to be baptized. When Jesus is baptized, something wonderful happens. God Himself suddenly appears. God says in Matthew 3:17, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" In other words, God is endorsing Jesus as the Messiah. For the Jews, it meant the waiting was over. The Messiah had finally arrived. To us, it means more. It means that Jesus was the most unique life who ever lived. He was the very incarnation of God, the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is our only hope of salvation. Baptism reminds us that Christianity is the one true faith! Baptism is a witness. We are telling the world that Jesus is our only hope of salvation. Mohammed and Buddha were fine people, but they were not the son of God. They are both dead, but Jesus is alive. By your presence here today I am assuming you believe Christianity is the one true faith. If you believe Christianity is the one true faith, say, "**Amen!**"

## **Family**

The second word is *family*. In the scripture lesson for today, Paul is traveling with Timothy. Who is Timothy? Timothy is several things. For one thing, Timothy is a product of a Christian home. Timothy's grandmother was Lois and his mother was Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy was not a first generation believer. He was at least a third generation believer. I do not know how much Paul knew about family dynamics but I do know this. Paul knew the greatest influence on Timothy's life was his family. The greatest influence on your life is your family. The greatest influence on the child being baptized is his or her family.

That is why in the ritual we ask the parents of the baby these questions:

**Beloved, do you in presenting this child for holy Baptism confess your faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?**

**Do you therefore accept your duty and privilege to live before this child a life that becomes the Gospel; to exercise all godly care that he be brought up in the Christian faith, that he be taught the Holy Scriptures, and that he may learn to give the reverent attendance upon the private and public worship of God?**

**Will you endeavor to keep the child under the ministry and guidance of the church?**

The parents always say, "We do" or "We will." However, on the day the parents answer, "No!" the baptism is over. Infant baptism means nothing if the faith means nothing to the parents. Let me ask you this question: how important is the faith to you? If you want your child to take the faith seriously, then you must take the faith seriously. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" In infant baptism we are admitting Christianity is the one true faith. In infant baptism the family is promising to be a holy model of Christian living. That takes us to the third word.

## **Fellowship**

The third word is *fellowship*. There comes a point in the baptism ritual that the attention leaves the baby and the parents. It is now the church's turn to make the promise. How many times have you recited these words?

**With God's help we will so order our lives after the example of Christ, that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to eternal life.**

Don't just read the words, look at the meaning. The church is promising to create a Christian environment to influence the child toward salvation. That is why Vacation

Bible School is important. That is why Sunday school is so important. That is why the annual mission trip is so important. (They leave for Madison, West Virginia in thirty-one days!) That is why Junior Church is so important. God has entrusted these young souls to us, so we must be at our best. How could you enjoy the riches of heaven if one of these precious souls was missing? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" This is the truth. We can have the best Christian Education program in the history of the church, but if the parents don't give us the opportunity to work with their young, then it means nothing!

Recently, I had the privilege of baptizing a little girl by the name of Emily. Baptisms are great for three reasons. First, baptisms are great because they bring people to the church. It is no fun preaching to a half empty room. The more the merrier. Second, baptisms are great because they remind us of the goodness in younger generations. Sometimes we fail to see the goodness in other generations. Church is the last place where all generations mix. Third and finally, baptisms are great because we get to see a baby. How often do you get to see a baby? That is why I walk around with the baby. During those few sacred moments the spotlight rested squarely on Emily. It was a nice moment for the family and parents. It was a nice moment for the church. Someone said to me at the conclusion of the worship, "It was a nice baptism. I was sorry when it ended and you started to talk." This is the good news for today. Emily's baptism isn't over. It is just beginning. The real work begins after the water dries. Watchman Nee once said, "*Baptism is an outward expression of an inward faith.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Will you pray with me?