

The Sacrament of Baptism at Batavia United Methodist Church

Introduction

The sacrament of Christian Baptism is one of the most significant events for a Christian congregation. Baptism marks the entry of the baptized into the body of Christ, the Church, and the life of discipleship. Although the Sacrament is celebrated in the community of the Batavia United Methodist Church, it is important to remember that the one being baptized is baptized as a “Christian,” and “initiated into Christ’s Holy Church.” Baptism belongs to the whole Church, not a particular denomination nor is it the possession of a particular local church. What Is Baptism? Like a diamond, baptism has many facets, each of which helps us to understand the fullness of this significant act. Here are some of the facets:

- **Baptism is a Sacrament.**

A sacrament is a symbolic act in which we acknowledge, receive and celebrate God’s gracious love with us. For baptism, the symbol is water. As water is essential for our lives, cleanses us, satisfies our thirst, is necessary for growth, and is enjoyable, so God’s grace fills our lives with joy and possibilities. Baptism is one of the two historic Sacraments observed by the Protestant Church. The other is the Lord’s Supper. In his Great Commission, Jesus commands his followers to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) Baptism is an essential mark of the Church.

- **Baptism is a rite of initiation.**

Through the Sacrament of baptism we enter the covenant community of all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. As the ritual reminds us, “Those receiving the sacrament are thereby marked as Christian disciples and initiated into the fellowship of Christ’s holy church.” Baptism is a celebration of the covenant God has initiated among us, “The Holy Spirit works within you, that being born of water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.” Baptism is our response to God’s covenant. A covenant is a particular relationship that is rooted in trust and promise. As a covenant, Baptism responds to God’s gracious love with our promise to walk as God’s people.

- **Baptism is a sign of the New Covenant.**

God has initiated a New Covenant in Christ Jesus. Every covenant has a sign. With Abraham the sign is circumcision; with Noah, it is a rainbow; with Jeremiah, it is a new law written on the heart. For Christians, the sign of the New Covenant is baptism. Baptism celebrates the new life we have in Christ Jesus and the promise of God’s saving love with us in him.

- **Baptism is a marking as a Christian Disciple.**

Baptism also marks the baptized as Disciples of Christ Jesus. Such marking is the choice of parents for an infant or child and the choice of the baptized for a youth or adult. In either case, baptism includes a choice to be a disciple and to walk in the way of faithful discipleship. The act of baptism, then, not only marks one’s entrance into the church, but also, his or her entrance into the life of discipleship. Baptism celebrates new life, a dying to the old and a rising to the new. John Wesley spoke of baptism as a “new birth,” indicating the dramatic nature of this transformation.

- **Baptism is a means of grace.**

Baptism opens us in specific ways to God's gracious love. Baptism looks back with joy and gratitude to what God's grace has already accomplished, to how that same grace is active in the present moment, and to the anticipated ways that grace will bless us in the future. In short, Baptism is a means of grace, access to God's transforming love. As a means of grace, Baptism empowers the baptized to share in the general ministry of the Church, the sharing of the Good News of God's love in Christ Jesus. In a very real way, all Christians are ordained into ministry by their baptism. Note that baptism is "by water and the Spirit." This means that not only are we marked with water as a reminder of God's love, we also have "the laying on of hands" as a reminder of the empowering work of the God's Spirit in our lives.

At What Age Should One Be Baptized?

"People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.'" (Luke 18.15-17)

The United Methodist Church, like most mainline Protestant Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, baptizes infants, children, youth and adults. For infants and children, who cannot answer for themselves, it is the parent's faith that honors God's grace and love. At a later date, those baptized as infants or children go through a process of "confirming" their baptismal vows in the act of Confirmation. For youth and adults, who can answer for themselves, baptism becomes a decision to honor God's grace and love grounded in their own faith. The United Methodist tradition does not focus on "adult believer's baptism." Based on the New Testament reports of "household" baptisms and the Gospel memory of Jesus' call to "let the children" come to him, the core Christian principle of God's unrestricted grace and love is affirmed for infants and young children. Most importantly, baptism is a celebration of God's grace and love offered to us undeserved and unearned. This image of grace is powerfully celebrated in the baptism of an infant.

Thus all persons of any age, stage or situation of life are invited to baptism. The initiative of God is what we honor and celebrate! The United Methodist BOOK OF DISCIPLINE states this well: "...because the redeeming love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, extends to all persons and because Jesus explicitly included children in his kingdom, the pastor of each charge shall earnestly exhort all Christian parents or guardians to present their children to the Lord in Baptism at an early age." (par. 221) Regardless of age, the baptized is a "babe in the faith" and is launched on the journey of discipleship in which grace will continue to nurture and nourish her or his life.

By What Method Should Baptism Be Done?

In the United Methodist Church, the sacrament of holy baptism may be administered by any of the three modes, immersion, pouring or sprinkling. The candidate or the parents may make a choice of the method. Each of these methods expresses an aspect of the rich symbolism of baptism. Each symbolizes a cleansing or washing. Immersion is a powerful image of our dying with Christ as we go under the water and our rising with Christ as we come up out of the water. Pouring expresses the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the living water. And sprinkling expresses growth and nurturing. Early church history represents all these methods for baptism (often according to availability of water and climate.) At Batavia United Methodist most baptisms are by sprinkling. However, baptism by pouring or immersion can be arranged and celebrated.

Baptism is an Act of Worship

A baptismal font in a church sanctuary speaks of centrality of the Sacrament of Baptism in the life of the church. In some churches, the font is found at the entrance of the sanctuary as a reminder that baptism is a rite of initiation. In other churches, the font is located in the center of the worshiping congregation as a reminder of the centrality of baptism for our life together. Batavia United Methodist Church seeks to always have the font located prominently to declare that baptism is a significant part of the life of faith.

Since baptism is the acknowledging, receiving and celebrating of the grace of God in Christ with us, it follows that baptism should take place with the worshiping congregation present where the covenant can be affirmed. Private baptisms are, for all practical purposes, an oxymoron. Sometimes circumstances make it necessary for baptism to take place outside a service of worship. In this case, the pastor will be accompanied by a lay person who represents the congregation in the administration of the Sacrament. The baptism is then reported to the congregation at their next worship service that the newly baptized may be included in the prayers of the members.

How to Schedule a Baptism

The Sacrament of Christian Baptism may be celebrated on any Sunday that the worship service and a presiding pastor can accommodate. A baptism is scheduled by contacting the church office and setting up a meeting with a pastor. In the pre-baptismal meeting the parents or candidate and pastor talk about the meaning of baptism, discuss any questions or concerns and talk about the service. Because baptism is a covenant celebration, it is important for the family to seriously consider the covenant responsibilities invoked. Covenant members of the Batavia UMC should welcome this opportunity to renew their covenant vows at the baptism of children or youth. Pastors welcome the opportunity to affirm these same faith principles and covenant responsibilities with nonmembers, participating or nonparticipating, as they present their children for the Sacrament of Baptism.

***Baptism is never administered more than once.**

As United Methodists, we recognize the validity of all baptisms done in the Name of the Triune God. We affirm that what God has done is not undone even by human choice and thus must not be treated as invalid! Persons often have powerful religious experiences that renew and remind them of their baptism covenant. "Renewal of baptism" is a vital part of Christian discipleship and is the appropriate celebration of spiritual renewal and "remembering" what God has been doing in our lives all along.

Expectations of the Covenant Participants

Role of the Parents

Parents have a primary responsibility for passing on faith to their children. Children are absorbing the spirit of God from the moment of conception. We know how children are like sponges, watching, hearing, feeling, and reflecting all aspects of their environment and those closest relationships. Parents have an awesome responsibility and privilege! The liturgy of baptism recognizes that parents help nurture their children's spiritual development by:

- living a life that is consistent with the Gospel
- accepting the ministry and guidance of the Church
- worshipping God and reading the Scriptures regularly

Parents are encouraged to prepare spiritually and practically for their children's baptism by:

- reflecting on the meaning of baptism as a sacrament
- praying for God in Christ's help and guidance in carrying out their responsibilities
- choosing sponsors who will have an important spiritual impact on the child
- planning for the baptism carefully and well in advance

Parents can teach their children about the life of discipleship by:

- setting aside time each day for family devotions
- modeling prayer, worship attendance, service, and Scripture reading
- being responsible covenant members of the church
- participating in Christian witness and fellowship

Role of the Church

In the covenant of baptism, the worshipping church body represents the whole Church and proclaims its promise to love and care for the newly baptized. That vow is a powerful reminder that the Sacrament of Baptism unites the baptized not only with God, but also with all God's people. The church's role is to participate in the life of the baptized by acts of love, care, nurture and support. The church promises to provide training, mentoring, and serving experiences that will enable the baptized to mature in faith and grow in their relationship with God in Christ.

Batavia United Methodist Church affirms its role by investing time, resources, and trained leadership in ministry with children and youth. Children from birth through three years of age are added to the "Cradle Roll" as a way to bring focus to the most dynamic developmental period of human life around personality and spirituality. The church likewise seeks to support and nurture parents as they raise their children to be faithful disciples. This is a sacred responsibility to be a nurturing community through worship, service, Bible Study and other learning experiences, and fellowship.

Sponsors and Godparents

Those selected to be sponsors or godparents for the Sacrament of Baptism should be persons who will be a part of that nurturing environment and relationships that can lead children to their own relationship with Christ. The Baptism covenant will include sponsors/godparents and parents as well as the larger congregation and the whole Church. In choosing sponsors or godparents, it would be prudent to choose persons of faith, who are actively participating in a church. Sponsors or godparents do not have to be United Methodist.