

I remember when I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, that I was told that the bishop would come and lay his hands on me, and thereby be given the grace of the Holy Spirit. Well, my expectations ran rather high. At some level, I thought that I would feel some sort of electric current or jolt of lightning running through me, or some other dramatic appearance of the Spirit would astound me. I rather hoped it would. Perhaps I would see flames dancing on top of heads, as they did at Pentecost. I was vaguely disappointed that it did not happen. But looking back, I cannot deny that the Spirit has been working in me on a regular basis.

Our scriptures today suggest that there are two kinds of baptism – baptism by water, and baptism by the Holy Spirit. In Acts, Peter and John discover that the Samaritans have not been baptized by the Holy Spirit, only in the name of the Lord Jesus. Presumably that meant that they had been baptized by water. And so Peter and John prayed for them and laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. The apostles themselves had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, with flames dancing on their heads. I wonder if the Samaritans saw flames dancing that day, or if they too were vaguely disappointed.

In the gospel, John renounces any claim to being the Messiah by saying that he only baptizes with water, but the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John is suggesting that baptism through Jesus is much the superior. Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized with a crowd of other people. Unlike the other gospels, Luke does not mention that Jesus was baptized by John, but was baptized with a crowd of other people. It is later, after his baptism, when he is praying, that the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

John's baptism by water was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The symbolism of washing is clear, that through baptism by water we are cleansed of whatever

besmirches us. John obviously thought this was important, but it does not appear that he thought it would save us from judgment. Bear fruit worthy of repentance he said, or face the winnowing fork. Baptism by water gives us the opportunity for new life, unencumbered by the mistakes and hard-heartedness of our previous life. You know that one of the symbols of baptism by immersion is death by drowning. The significance of that is something we may miss by our pouring a little water over a child's head. But then we emerge from death in a foreshadowing of our resurrection into a whole new life.

Baptism by the Holy Spirit appears to have different functions. First of all, the Holy Spirit empowers us for ministry. We can trace the beginning of Jesus' ministry to his baptism. Certainly when the apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were energized to go out to heal and proclaim the good news. When we were baptized we too were empowered to continue in the apostle's teaching, in worship, and prayer, to resist evil, to proclaim the Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and striving for justice and peace. It's all there in our baptismal covenant.

Second, baptism by the Spirit tells us that we belong to God, and thus to God's community. I love the phrase in the baptismal service, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." Not for now, not even for our lifetime, but forever beyond our deaths. We are marked as Christ's own, as children of God, in the kingdom of God. Our baptism gives us an identity within the community. Sometimes baptism is spoken of as a christening – the time when we are given our name in Christ. Jesus, too, was given his identity when God declared, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." It is baptism which makes us members of the church, with all the rights and privileges (except voting at annual meetings). Baptism cannot be a self-help project. You can't baptize yourself. You can

only be baptized by another baptized person, and so baptism creates a community of Christians we call the church. It took Peter and John to come and lay hands on the Samaritans.

Our baptism cannot be worked out in a vacuum; it requires living with other people in all their complexity, in all their lovability or non-lovability. Through our church communities, we learn patience and tolerance. We learn how to forgive when we have been hurt, and to ask for forgiveness when we have hurt someone else. In community we learn to care for the needs of someone besides ourselves. We learn that we can be vulnerable. The church carries us when our doubts are in danger of overwhelming our faith, and sometimes we let others borrow our faith that gets someone else through a hard time.

Baptism creates a new family for us. You have heard it said that “Blood is thicker than water.” Well, in the baptismal community that is reversed, “Water becomes thicker than blood.” But it is the blood of Christ that thickens the water. We are linked with each other through Jesus Christ. And like family, church is a place where we always belong.

Finally, baptism by the Holy Spirit expands our understanding of how we relate to God. The Samaritans had been baptized in the name of Jesus, but not the Father or Holy Spirit. Relating to God through Jesus is wonderful, of course, but there are others ways. Most of us were attracted to Christianity in the first place by our relationship with one person of the Trinity. For me that was the Creator God, the Father. As someone interested in science I think that was quite natural when I thought of the wonderful way creation has been made. As I grew in my relationship with God, however, I began to relate more directly with Jesus Christ as a more personal connection, a more embodied way of relating to God. Then I grew in appreciation more and more for a mystical approach to God, as I felt more and more drawn to him. I believe through the Holy Spirit, God invites us into a richer and more mature relationship with him.

Okay, so I have now made what seemed a rather straightforward sacrament altogether confusing. Is there one baptism or two? Is it forgiveness of sins or empowerment and membership? Dunking or sprinkling? Indeed, baptism is looked at very differently in different churches. Some would not agree with infant baptism. Others might say that a second baptism is necessary in a born-again kind of experience. It has been the cause of many schisms. Happily, the Episcopal Church baptizes in the name of the Father Son, and Holy Spirit, by water and the spirit, all done in one baptism. Of course, now all we have to do is figure out the pesky theology of the sacrament of confirmation! But that is another sermon.

Our baptism by water and the spirit may not produce any fireworks while we are at the font. But the Spirit will be working on us, perhaps behind the scenes, to produce fire in our lives. We will know that we have been set aflame by the fruits we bear. As we reaffirm our baptismal covenant, I would ask that you reflect on where your life has been set on fire by God. How have you lived out your baptism? What fruits do you bear?

Please turn to page 304 in the Book of Common Prayer as we reaffirm our baptism.