

“The Font Is In The Way!”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

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Mark 1:4-11 = baptism of Jesus

Charlotte Nabors, a Disciples of Christ minister, tells of a conflict her property committee and worship committee were having over building renovations. The discussions in the Church Board had drawn out for months over the design of a new sanctuary. When the debate reached a crescendo, one elder in exasperation blurted out:



“The baptistry is in the way!”

An acoustic engineer I know asserts something similar. He says that in the acoustic design of a sanctuary the first question to ask is where the baptistry is located. Its location determines the baseline for all the acoustic properties of the sanctuary. While this may be true architecturally and acoustically, but in terms of our faith, is baptism ever an impediment?

Don't think that using a font instead of a baptistry lets anyone off the hook.

In the ensuing discussion, Presbyterian pastor Randy Branson told of moving the baptismal font in his congregation out of a closet to the exact center.



It remained there for a few weeks and then it began to move, mysteriously and surreptitiously. Midweek it would move further and further to the side until it once again disappeared completely. In the ensuing conversations it came out:

“I don't like it at the center.”

“The choir and the children trip over it.”

“I'm afraid we will knock it over. It's happened before.”

“Did the Session authorize this?”

“I like it the way it was.”

The plaintive cry:



“The font is in the way!”

In one of my own congregations the real reason finally emerged:

“We don’t like to be reminded every Sunday that we’re not baptizing people like we’re called to do!”

I didn’t believe my own eyes either, but in another of my congregations, the heavyweight white marble baptismal font proved so inconvenient, that I actually found it stored outside the church building where it functioned as a sanctified birdbath. I never did discover the story behind its relocation outside, but clearly: out-of-sight does imply out-of-mind?



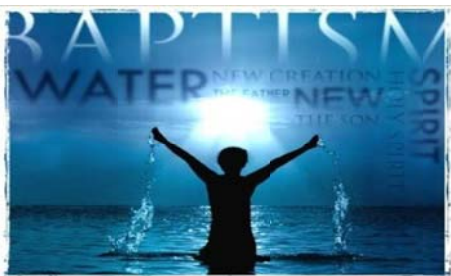
The four essential elements in our worship space are: the table, the font, the pulpit and the empty cross. These four,



no more, no less ~ no cross with Jesus on it, no stations of the cross, no icon screen, and it’s a communion table, folks, not an altar. These four both show what we have in common with all other Christians, and those things which distinguish us from other denominations and their theologies.

These four central elements of our faith are located somewhere close to the centerline of the sanctuary. All other elements are optional and additive. So why does the one, baptism, seems to draw the short straw?

It is a shame that for many of us baptism is never much more than a passing thought ~ the profound significance of God’s grace communicated in the sacrament is lost, so too is lost its life-changing power ~ “out-of-sight” definitely can mean “out-of-mind.”



Those of us baptized as infants cannot remember our own baptism. We are dependent on church members and family who have described how we had water poured over our heads as infants and so we have been brought up on the promises of a faithful extended family to sustain us, to protect us, and to help lead us to follow

the path of God.

There are some among us who have not been baptized, but that is OK because none are excluded, even the unbaptized. God is still at work in those who are following Jesus, even if unbaptized. They are still absolutely part of the community of Jesus, because baptism is the outward sign of the grace of God already at work in every one of our lives.

Baptized or unbaptized we are all part of the same community of Jesus whose purpose is to constantly remind us that God does love and care for us, does bestow grace upon grace, does have compassion for all; and because of all that, our remembering baptism shares that life-changing fact within the community and with the world.



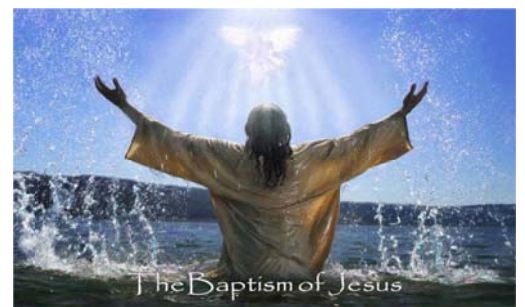
Even among the baptized, if Baptism is out of mind, then we are not fully functioning. It is unfortunately easy even with baptism by immersion to lose the wonderment ~ allowing the grist of daily life to push the swell of grace experienced into a decrescendo until silenced. If on the other hand we remember every day that we are children of God, chosen by God, trying each day to live on the path Jesus laid out, then faith has integrity.

If we should put baptism front and center in our lives, what would that do? Some of us remember a moment when we were baptized on our own declaration of following Jesus. That is the joyful experience shared by the full immersion side of Christianity. Remember that remarkable baptism scene in the movie *"O Brother Where Art Thou."*



You know the story. After their baptism in the river, Pete and Delmar reasoned they better be good from now on, because any future crimes aren't covered. As admirable as such resolve is, nothing could be further from the truth. Baptism is not once-and-for-all nor is it magic. Past, present, future forgiveness are bound together and exist forever through baptism. Forgiveness does put us in a renewed relationship with God and others where we can change, and where our past does not dictate the future.

This is what happened with Jesus: at baptism Jesus became a person transformed ~ the Holy Spirit descending in physical form like a dove.

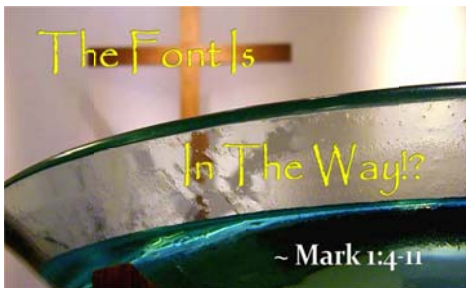


You know what a catalyst is. It is a substance which causes a reaction in other molecules but which remains itself undiminished. Baptism is our catalyst for growth, the unchanging waters of eternity which change us, transform us ~ its power undiminished.

This glorious message ~ God, the ruler of the entire universe, creator of all that is and was and will be, cosmic judge, jury and prosecuting attorney all at once ~ that God truly loves us enough to forgive us, redeem us ~ opening us up to kingdom living which brings us new life, life for the ages, eternal life.

In some ways baptism does get in the way. It does separate us from the world. After all, living uneethically is a lot easier than striving to live on

God's path. Struggling to make God's justice our justice, God's compassion our compassion is not easy. Praying sincerely "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" puts us between a rock and a hard place.



After baptism we definitely remain in the world, but baptism is what marks us as not of this world. We are servants of the suffering servant, stewards of the mysteries, children of the covenant.

We enter the waters with Jesus. We are drowned, we have died to evil and been reborn to good. We have joined Jesus in death ~ we have also joined Jesus in resurrection life.

Our baptism is in the way. It is profoundly inconvenient. It calls us to do more, to be more, to do everything better.

And ~ it calls us to be living witnesses to God's Holy Spirit which can, does and will change lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.