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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Baptism of Our Lord/First Sunday after the Epiphany
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 3:13-17

Even though the baptism of Jesus wasn't quite the same as one of today's baptisms, we can plainly see that the act itself is an initiation. In Jesus' case, it marked the inauguration of his public ministry. In our case, it marks our entrance into the community of faith -- Christ's own body, the Church. One thing that's a bit baffling, though, is the reason for Jesus' baptism...after all, he's Jesus, so why would he need to be baptized? He answers this question with a rather unsatisfying answer: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15b).

In other words, "We're doing this because I said so!"

Rites of initiation are performed in order to offer visible and tangible witness to one's initiation. Even Jesus considered it necessary to be baptized; indeed, it was a visible and tangible witness to who he was and who he would come to be. Granted, he wasn't baptized for the same reasons that we are; he didn't need to become a part of the church and he didn't have an issue with original sin. Yet his baptism marked a beginning to a new era in his life. At their most basic level, that is what our baptisms are, too.

Over the past several years, there has been discussion over the necessity of the Sacrament of Baptism for admission to the Lord's Table for Holy Communion. Those in favor of welcoming non-baptized people to receive the Sacrament consider it an important gesture of hospitality, while those against it cry foul at this seemingly 180-degree turn away from centuries-old church teaching.

It's no secret that non-baptized individuals have been receiving Christ's Body and Blood for quite some time, often in "worshiping communities" that deliberately set themselves apart from the traditional "church." This has raised the eyebrows of more conservative folks who adhere to the belief that Holy Baptism marks one's admittance to the Church and that Holy Communion is the meal that sustains the baptized.

In this age of everybody seeming overly sensitive about everything, we, of course, fear being perceived as "exclusive" or "unwelcoming." Thus, to celebrate a meal and ask that certain people not partake of it is a most inhospitable snub. Yet one must also question the wisdom of reversing centuries of church teaching, as if to say, "We know better than the ancients." If one's aim is to be hospitable, one might be better off inviting a non-baptized person to the baptismal font, so that the person may be welcomed first into the Christian community and then to the community's meal.

Communion of non-baptized persons puts the cart before the horse; it's like letting someone jump the gate while everyone else passes through it like they're supposed to. Please don't think I'm proposing minimum age requirements for Communion, however; I believe that the little ones can know that they're receiving Jesus just as well as everyone else. It would be more problematic to think that persons without even a professed faith in Christ would (or should) receive his precious Body and Blood. There doesn't seem to be much logic in that...

Baptism is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, and full participation in the life of the Christian community depends chiefly on Baptism. To deny its necessity is to yank the cornerstone from this great edifice of the Christian faith and let it crumble into fad, fancy, and whim. We cannot build a meaningful and coherent Christianity atop a non-existent foundation.

Indeed, Holy Baptism is an entrance, not an afterthought. If Jesus himself was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness," then we are baptized to fulfill the covenant initiated by God that promises God's faithfulness to us forever. To balk at the idea of being baptized -- and, at the same time, expect all the blessings and benefits of being baptized -- is to rather foolishly dismiss a joyful and precious gift.

It is important, as always, to learn a bit from Jesus here, too. If someone who didn't "need" to be baptized had himself baptized, why wouldn't anyone else want to be baptized? With that in mind, I cannot see how Holy Communion for baptized persons only is the gross and inhospitable imposition that it's made out to be. How much is it to ask of people that they present themselves at the baptismal font before we commune them?

Not much, I'd say.

I mention these matters today to encourage your support of the historic Christian teaching of Communion for the baptized, regardless of what folks might be doing elsewhere. Realize, too, that your pastor would never knowingly commune a non-baptized person; I maintain this out of respect for the teachings of the Church, not as a way of being unwelcoming or inhospitable. Those who desire to be communed at the table will first be welcomed to the font if the Sacrament of Baptism has not already been administered to them.

I ask, too, that you give thanks for the gift of Baptism in your own life. Think of how, through this great gift, God takes you in his arms and says, "This is my son...or daughter...the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." You have been baptized into Christ, whose own baptism pointed the way to the Christian Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism will remain the defining testament to one's per-

manent bond between God and oneself, as well as to the transformation of the old self into the new self. Indeed, you are a new being thanks to Baptism, empowered and guided by God to glorify him and turn your back to sin.

Think, too, of the concept of "baptismal call," which means that a baptized person has a sacred vocation that can take any number of forms; one may live out one's Baptism not only in the Church, but in the secular world, as well. Your career, your charitable giving, your volunteering, or your serving can be ways of sharing the good news, even when said sharing may not be immediately obvious.

Now, think more specifically of how your Baptism calls you to tell others about it. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commissions the disciples to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). Thus, I ask you: As a baptized Christian, do you desire to see others baptized? We are in an age where the fastest growing segment of the population is the segment with no religious affiliation at all, so the future will demand us to both evangelize and be faithful in the teachings we have received. That said, I would encourage all churches and church members to share the good news without reducing it to fun and games and entertainment...not to mention resorting to questionable practices like communing non-baptized persons!

So, the baptized shall, in this scenario, lead others to Baptism. What's difficult here is figuring out how to do that. Old-fashioned, heavy-handed evangelism that did little more than threaten folks with eternal damnation likely won't work in this skeptical and often cynical world. Thus, we will need skilled and creative evangelists ready to rise to this great challenge.

Note, too, that this calling applies to all the baptized. Clergy are typically

thought to be the Church's chief evangelists, which unfortunately results in them being the only evangelists. So I ask you; How much training do you really need to tell someone about Jesus Christ? Quite honestly, you don't need very much. This art, as I mentioned earlier, involves more skill and creativity than it does education. And you won't develop much skill or creativity if you don't at least try!

The good news here is that, through Baptism, you have been granted a relationship that's worth telling others about. God claims you as his own much in the same way he claimed Jesus himself as he rose from the waters of the Jordan. And as Jesus proceeded from baptism to ministry, so too do all of us proceed from Baptism to ministry. We have passed into a new era, and this passage is witnessed to in the rite of Baptism itself. Sin died and newness of life took its place. We baptize because we need this to happen before we can receive the further gifts of the community of faith; indeed, we inaugurate a life in the faith that returns to the font and to the Table so that we may be reminded of who we are -- loved and forgiven children of God.

And if you're ever tempted to think that Baptism is not necessary, remember, Jesus was baptized, too! Surely, the One who did not need it makes us need it all the more. Don't be afraid to invite someone else to the waters...

Amen.