

## ***Baptism by Fire***

Acts 8:14-17

In a few minutes' time, Chris Butta—a member of this congregation for over twenty years, the Moderator of the church for the past four years, and a deacon for the last seven—will be baptized in the veritable Baptist manner of full body immersion.

Now for those of you who have been around here for a while, this might seem a bit odd and out of order. By traditional custom, one is baptized *first* and then joins the church and pays one's dues prior to acquiring leadership roles, especially those that Chris has superbly filled. And old-timey Baptists go further, insisting on a personal confession of faith and declaration of repentance before the sacred waters of baptism, as was the custom in days of yore.

Once upon a time, it was common practice that baptism demanded a serious spiritual reckoning before the glowering judgment of heaven, where our “dunkin’ do-not” ancestors were ready to root out imposters in order to maintain the moral integrity of the confessing church. Under those rigorous preparatory demands, most baptismal candidates were then battle tested by the icy cold waters of the Mystic River. If you didn't go down into those waters a true believer, old Deacon Palmer was waiting to see if you cussed like a sinner once you came back up!

Alas, Chris will be baptized under no such 19<sup>th</sup>-century scrutiny or frigid discomfort. She, in fact, grew up Methodist and was already baptized as a child into the believing community of her family's church. She isn't being re-baptized now because she has suddenly had an epiphany on Epiphany. Nor is she doubting the meaning or efficacy of her first baptism as some do, or making a religious recommitment as often happens.

Instead, Chris is experiencing a baptism of a different sort—one that already affirms her faith and service to the ways of Christ. Hers is a confirmation of the journey she has already taken—one that we have witnessed in her remarkable devotion to this church over the years and the quiet ways she has served the wider community, sometimes single-handedly, especially those in need of food and good company. The waters in which she will soon be immersed symbolize a faith that has been born out of God’s great love and nurtured and expressed through acts of mercy and compassion for others. It is an affirmation of grace, as she has already been the face of Christ to others and the hands of hope for those who see very little of God in their world. She has been a bearer of Christ’s Spirit for many, while her own spirit has been nourished and fed in the process.

Though Chris probably wouldn’t articulate her outlook in this manner, this is how I interpret her desire to be baptized before she and her husband move back to Massachusetts to take care of her mother. Chris would claim it’s something she wanted to do for what this church has meant to her and her family over the years, Katie and Kelsey in particular—being a supportive and nurturing community of faith for them. Her baptism is an act of spiritual solidarity with her spiritual home and all that we stand for as a community of Christ in her life and in the lives of others. She did not want to leave this place without having the traditional and in many ways, defining, symbol of Christian commitment—baptism—be associated with where she has come to a greater understanding of divine love and what it means to follow the ways of Christ in this world. She has both inspired and been empowered by our welcoming spirit, our progressive perspective, and by our deep concern and compassion for those who have been displaced and marginalized by so many matters and people in life, as well as

benefitting from the wisdom, fellowship, and courage she has gained and offered in the process of doing this good work we share. Hers may be a baptism by water, but it represents a baptism by fire of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration she receives for her life.

Liturgically, this is a perfect moment for such a ceremony. It just so happens that this Sunday's lectionary texts highlight baptism: most notably, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, as well as the one just read from Acts 8, where the Apostles Peter and John laid their hands upon the Samaritan disciples, who suddenly were inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues—a sign that they were now full disciples of Jesus by receiving a baptism by the Spirit.

This latter one intrigued me as I thought about it over the past few days, in that it's usually only our charismatic cousins, Pentecostals and the like, who make much of this Spirit-based baptism—one that for them justifies the speaking in tongues and other ecstatic experiences. At the same time, in these circles, it's not uncommon for the terminology, "baptism by the Holy Spirit," to serve as code words to evaluate and judge the authenticity of a person's faith. Namely, if you don't speak in tongues, you are not inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus, missing out on what God wants for all Christian worshippers. As you can imagine, references to a separate Spirit-baptism are controversial and divisive, even in their settings.

However, as tempted as I might be to delve in on this topic, I will bypass controversy this morning because, for me, evidence of the Spirit's presence is found not in what we say, inasmuch as it's reflected in the things we do—inspired actions and attitudes that, I believe, are meant to better approximate the values and virtues of the realm of God in our lives.

Embodying the values of the realm of God in our lives is not just to make us better people, but more to the point, for us to help model God's new society on earth—to bring the ideals of Paradise to earth, in a manner of speaking, in the way things were intended to be in right relationship, free from the brokenness of relationships and evil intentions that so often characterize human relations in the world in which we live. In that light, the point of being baptized, then, is not to provide us salvation for the afterlife (as it is so often portrayed); instead, we are baptized into a community of faith that follows the teachings of Jesus and whose mission and purpose is to reflect the values and right-relationships of God's paradise in the here and now—not just within the church itself, but in our engagement with the world at large. The inspiration behind this comes from God's own Spirit present in and among us.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, in their fascinating book, *Saving Paradise*, have brought this point home by providing example after example from the first thousand years of Christianity, where the mission of the church was largely understood to be this very thing: to embody Paradise—to be a reflection of God's intentions for all human relations, rather than be the imperial institutional power as it often was, or the rival religion to other faith traditions as it has come to be. They explain that paradise in early Christian thought and practice wasn't about what one enters upon death; instead, it was what one lived in the present, bringing the Spirit's light and luminosity to daily life. They write:

...[E]arly Christian paradise was something other than "heaven" or the afterlife. Our modern views of heaven and paradise think of them as a world after death. However, in the early church, paradise—first and foremost—was this world, permeated and blessed by the Spirit of God. It was on the earth. Images of it in Rome and Ravenna captured the craggy, scruffy pastoral landscape, the orchards, the clear night skies, and teeming waters of the Mediterranean world, as if they were lit by a power from within. Sparkling mosaics in vivid colors captured the

world's luminosity. The images filled the walls of spaces in which liturgies fostered aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences of life in the present, in a world created as good and delightful.

Like the breathing of a human body, the images said that God blessed the earth with the breath of Spirit. It permeated the entire cosmos and made paradise the salvation that baptism in the Spirit offered.

...Cyril of Jerusalem taught that the Spirit's descent [at Jesus' baptism and later for the disciples at Pentecost] reopened paradise. To the flaming sword that barred entrance to paradise he contrasted the tongues of flame in Acts 2:1-4 that appeared over the heads of the community at Pentecost as they preached in many languages. "The fiery sword barred of old the gates of Paradise; the fiery tongue which brought salvation restored the gift."<sup>1</sup>

So baptism, ritually by water and metaphorically by fire, was viewed as the portal to paradise, but only as it was lived out in daily life. Fulfilling paradise was the mission of the church, evidenced by how well people reflected Jesus' teachings, how well they treated each other, how they were able to love their enemies and remain nonviolent in a barbaric world, and their perseverance to live in right relations with all people and creatures on earth. They were to embody a world where the lion and the lamb could lie down together. Practically, the presence of the Spirit as the inspiration behind this was evident in its fruit, e.g., "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," as the Apostle Paul characterized them in Galatians (5:22,23). The realm of God, or paradise in practice, was an alternative vision for the way the world could be.

This was, by no means, a casual commitment to following Jesus' teachings. To create paradise on earth took effort to realize in company with those who shared the same vision. Personal and social transformation

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<sup>11</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Beacon Press, 2008, pp. xv, 144.

were the hallmarks of belief in ancient Christian communities as they attempted to reflect paradise. Again, as these two authors write:

Today, we speak of believing or not believing in religious ideas as if belief in a predetermined and authoritative set of ideas were the most defining element of religion. For ancient Christians, intellectual understanding was pursued through careful teaching and lively debate, but assent to particular ideas was only one aspect of a more comprehensive transformation. To believe in Christian ideas without committing to a community and living out those beliefs would be like believing regular exercise is the key to good health...but doing nothing physical. A privately and personally held belief that was not lived out in community and society would be equally useless. ... Transformative rituals, however, require performing them under the guidance of competent teachers. Early Christian baptism worked in just such ways.<sup>2</sup>

So, is this what baptism means for us? How are we at reflecting paradise in our life together as a community of faith? Do we sense the presence of the Spirit within us and among us? Do we strive for right relationships—just and merciful, compassionate and peaceful, generous and gentle, not only among ourselves, but with the wider world? Do we reflect paradise?

Overall, in my view, I think we do. We could be better at it at times, perhaps a bit more intentional, but I recognize and value the way we already work together and care for one another. I enjoy coming to meetings where people don't fight with each other when they disagree and where they trust others with leadership and there are no games or power plays. I love it that we are intergenerational and value and engage our children and youth and our elders. I'm amazed at times how much we seek to assist those in need and how many of you are faithful service providers in your own right. I'm proud of the way our church as a whole is committed to justice, mercy, peacemaking, and right relations in society. That's what it means to do the Spirit's work. That's what it's like to approximate paradise!

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<sup>2</sup> Brock, pg. 135.

That's where our focus should lie—not on some other existence we imagine in the afterlife, but on making this world become more like it was intended to be in its best nature in paradise.

With this in mind, I take great joy in baptizing Chris Butta, because she has lived this well in her years as part of this congregation. She is filled with the Spirit! Her lightness of being and enthusiastic character inspire us with her example. She is a true servant leader. She is a good soul who has been blessed by God and generously shares her life blessing others.

If you share her outlook and spirit, then imagine yourself being baptized along with her. For you, Chris, and I together are part of this new world we continually create with God, in the midst of a world that frustrates hope and reflects far too often, the worst, rather than the best, human beings can be. So our mission never ends to bring paradise to life—the very same mission early Christians embraced as their purpose and reason to live.

As we prepare for when we, once again, share together in this sacred experience of baptism, I invite you to receive a blessing from one of those early Christian leaders, Ephrem the Syrian, who in the fourth century embraced the deep and eternal meaning behind this baptism by fire in the Spirit and the Eucharist:

*The Fire of compassion descended  
And took up residence in the Bread.  
See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore You;  
See, Fire and Spirit are in the river in which You were baptized.  
Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,  
In the Bread and the Cup are Fire and the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pg.144.

May peace come to all who partake and who impart, for the presence of heaven has come to earth in our lives. And all of creation shall be blessed.

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