

“The Font Is In The Way”

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Mark 1:4-11 + baptism

Charlotte Nabors, a Disciples of Christ minister, tells the story of a conflict the property committee and the 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!”

Architecturally, perhaps – sometimes true – maybe – but in terms of worship? In terms of faith? Never – or rather never should be.

Yet indeed the placement of the various essential elements of worship can substantially effect the texture and character of worship – the relationship of the table,

the font, and the pulpit.

Of course, there is a difference – a big difference between Disciples of Christ and Presbyterians in this respect. In the Disciples of Christ the practice of baptism is full immersion as adults. That is, they have a baptistry. In the sanctuary they have to account for a piece of equipment the size of a large Jacuzzi, rather than a diminutive font. In terms of architecture, a plumbing fixture of this size is certainly more difficult to deal with



than a simple font. Our baptismal font is movable and therein lays our problem.

Baptism is central to the common faith and practice of all Christians and therefore should be a central part of our worship architecture and experience – impossible to miss in a believers' baptism, full immersion congregation. Yet the principle is the same in a Presbyterian congregation with a font– the only difference is it is so much easier for Presbyterians to sideline or hide the font.



Of the three essential elements of Reformed worship – pulpit, table, font – our tendency is to leave the font out of the sanctuary sightlines – since it is not fixed in space like a baptistry. After all we don't do baptisms every Sunday – actually pretty rarely when you think about it, so the big problem is what we do with the font when we aren't using it. Most of us locate it out of sight or on the sidelines. And “out of

sight” in this case definitely means “out of mind.”

This isn't the only way the font can cause craziness. “The baptistry is in the way!” story was told during an ecumenical pastors' group while it was having an animated discussion on the location of the essential elements of worship in the sanctuary. The ensuing discussion included several Presbyterians who could attest that moving the baptismal font to a place closer to the centerline of the sanctuary brought on all kinds of unexpected responses.

Randy Branson another pastor in the group told of moving the baptismal font in his Presbyterian congregation out of a closet to the center. How it remained there for about six weeks and then mysteriously and surreptitiously it would move midweek further and further to the side until it once again



disappeared completely. In the ensuing conversations it came out:

“The baptismal font is inconvenient.”

“We don’t like it at the center.”

“It gets in the way.”

“Did Session authorize this?”

“We just wanted to put it back like it was.”

And perhaps the real reason finally emerges:

“We don’t like to be reminded every Sunday that we’re not doing what we’re supposed to do – baptizing people.”

My experience in two congregations which moved the font to the center – in both there was the usual grouching about inconvenience and then the fonts over time just like Randy’s found themselves gravitating out of eyesight into a hidden corner. The plaintive cry:

“The font is in the way!”

Just as inexplicably, another of my congregations found the massive white baptismal font so inconvenient that they actually stored it outside the church building where its effective function was as a sanctified birdbath.

The tendency to sideline the font in or even outside the sanctuary raises deep questions. Do we also have a tendency to sideline baptism in our lives? Can baptism get in the way of living? It is a shame that for most 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 its life-changing power is lost– “out of sight” definitely means “out of mind.”





Most of us do not even remember our own baptism. For most of us others, family witnesses have told us how we were sprinkled as infants and so brought up on the promises of a faithful extended family to protect us, sustain us, and help lead us to become followers of the Expected One.

Some of us remember a moment when we were baptized on our own declaration of following Jesus. It is unfortunately very easy even then to put this wonderment aside – allowing the grist of daily life to push the swell of grace experienced into a decrescendo until muted.

Moving from a musical metaphor into design for music, an acoustical engineer at a conference on Media Ministries asked what should be the first question a congregation asks itself when it is planning or renovating a place of worship. What is the first and primary, the most critical question for not only the acoustics but more importantly for the flow of worship in a new facility? What is the first question Craig Janssen asks of a client? He asks:



“Where is the location of the baptismal font or baptistry?”

All other questions, the architectural questions of course follow – layout of the sanctuary, worship accessibility, acoustics, lighting, location of the choir – all these, every one of these questions follows from the location of the font – or should.

Acoustics, lighting? Just so? But the relation of the pulpit, table and baptismal font are critical not just to the acoustical balance but to the entire flow and integrity of worship.

The critical architectural question is: “Where is the baptismal font?”

The critical worship question, the critical faith question is the same: “What is the location of the font?” If the font is invisible, worship is missing a key component. If prominent, then the preached Gospel is whole. If Baptism is out of mind, then we are not full Christians. If we remember every day that we are children of God, chosen by God, living each day as a follower of Jesus, baptized just as he was, then faith has integrity.

If we should put our own baptism back front and center in our lives, what would it mean? Remember the remarkable baptism scene in the movie *“O Brother Where Art Thou,”* a retelling of the

Odyssey as escaped convicts in Depression Era Mississippi. The two rather dim-witted companions to the Odysseus character hear the singing of a church congregation gathered at the river. They are taken up in the sheer beauty of the sacrament, and so excited they jump the line and both submit themselves for baptism, three times under the water.



On returning they bubble over with joy – all their sins are forgiven! What a release! Awe-struck with the incomparable message that God, our God, is a God of second-chances, they begin to recount all the crimes they have committed which are now blotted out – God acquittal. After several crimes are recounted and proclaimed “forgiven,” their unbaptized companion says:

“Wait, I thought you said you didn’t commit that crime.”

Pause – “Well I was lyin’ about that, and that’s forgiven too.”

On further thought, the two 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. Past, present, future,

forgiveness is a relationship which exists forever through baptism. Forgiveness does put us in a relationship with God and others where we can change and where the past does not dictate the future. This is what happens in baptism.



This is what happened with Jesus.

In the Eastern Orthodox Churches they underscore the specialness of Jesus' baptism by celebrating the Incarnation as happening on this occasion rather than at his birth as Western Christians do. Jesus came from a very ordinary life in Nazareth – scripture is almost completely silent about these thirty or so years. At baptism Jesus' life became something extra-ordinarily special – transformed.

John and Jesus are therefore our catalysts for growth. A catalyst is a substance which causes a reaction of other molecules but which remains itself unchanged. Baptism is our catalyst for growth, the unchanging water of eternity changes us, transforms us.

This glorious message – God, the ruler of the entire universe, creator of all that is and was and will be, cosmic judge and jury and prosecuting attorney all at once – that God stooping to forgive us – opening us up to new life, life for the ages, eternal life.

In a way baptism does get in the way. It does separate us in significant though subtle ways from the world.

The fact that we are redeemed Children of God is inconvenient.

Striving to live ethically is after all inconvenient.

Struggling to make God's justice our justice is inconvenient.

Praying sincerely "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" is inconvenient to say the least.



After baptism we are held to a different standard.

We definitely remain in the world, but baptism is what marks us as not of the world.

We are servants of the suffering servant,

stewards of the mysteries,
children of the covenant.

We enter the waters with Jesus
symbolically we are drowned, we have died,
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.

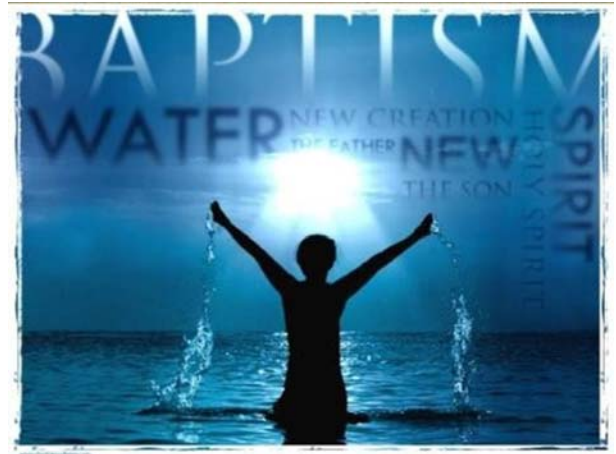
It is inconvenient – profoundly inconvenient.

It calls us to do more,

be more,

do everything better.

And – it calls us to be living witnesses to God's power
which can, does and will transform lives.



Thanks be to God. Amen.