

Mk 1:4-11  
 8 January 2012  
 Baptism of the Lord

### “Water Bonding”

Have I ever mentioned that I like *Star Trek*? Have I ever mentioned that I like **all** of the *Star Trek* series, as well as the movies?

I begin with *Star Trek* because at times I've told people that it has influenced my theology! Let me explain what I mean by describing a certain episode.<sup>1</sup>

One of the characters in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is Lieutenant Worf; he is a Klingon. Klingons are a race, who in the original series in the '60s, were bitter enemies of humans. However, by the time we get to this series, which aired in the late '80s and early '90s, the Federation and the Klingon Empire had signed a peace treaty. So there's a reflection of the end of the cold war.

Anyway, Worf leads an away team to explore a planet. One of the team members, an archaeologist, accidentally triggers a bomb from a war that ended centuries ago. (It's kind of like the way we use land mines.) Sadly, the woman who is killed leaves a son who already, at a very young age, had lost his father. The boy, Jeremy, is orphaned.

As the mission leader, Worf feels responsible for the death of his mother. Worf himself was orphaned at a young age. He invites the boy to join him in a Klingon ceremony called the R'uustai, or in English, “the bonding.” (It consists of lighting special candles and uttering certain Klingon words.) In this way, their families will be joined, and each will become stronger.

Okay, are you still with me? Watching that show, I realized how very important ritual is to the Klingons. Ritual enables them to handle these difficult moments, these great transitions. By inviting the young boy to join him in the R'uustai (as well as explaining its meaning), Worf helps Jeremy deal with his loss. Jeremy is given a framework, a frame of reference. It helps him begin the process of healing.

Ritual is important, not just for Klingons in a fictional universe, but also for humans in our universe. It helps in many different aspects of life. Weddings, funerals, graduations—these and many other occasions all involve ritual. They involve us in words and deeds that carry meaning. In these life transitions, we don't have to start from scratch. We have something to work with.

Still, I think we all can agree that various rituals have various levels of value. Some rituals are good. They communicate life and strength and courage. Some rituals do the opposite; they are bad. Some rituals reinforce fear and oppression and bigotry. They should be fought against.

This Sunday is Baptism of the Lord. We just heard the reading from the gospel of Mark. Later on, we'll look at Jesus' participation with John in the ritual of baptism. Baptism has come to be considered the sacrament of entry into the church. But before we get to all of that, I want to tell another story.

After Banu and I left the seminary, the first church we served was in Nebraska. One of the members was a lady in her seventies. After we had been there for a little

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<sup>1</sup> [www.startrek.com/database\\_article/bonding-the](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/bonding-the)

while, she asked us if we would baptize her. But she didn't want to do it the usual way, in a worship service. She wanted what was basically a secret baptism, on a Saturday afternoon when no one would be around.

We explained that baptism isn't a private matter. It's a joyful act of the church. After the sermon, we will reaffirm our baptismal covenant. For there to be a covenant, there has to be more than one person—more than one party involved. When there's a baptism, we promise each other things, in the sight of God. (Okay, back to the story.)

My impression was that her request came from a sense of embarrassment. This lady had probably lived her entire life in the church, but without ever being baptized. I tried to reassure her that that's okay; this is a cause for celebration. She wasn't persuaded, so Banu and I compromised. Besides the presence of some of her family, we arranged for a couple of the session members to attend her baptism.<sup>2</sup> She was okay with that.

(One thing I never figured out, though, was how she was able to join the church to begin with. "Have you been baptized?" is one of the **first** things you normally would ask.)

At any rate, I find what I'm **pretty certain** were her underlying feelings to be interesting. Somehow, it was communicated to her—probably many times and in some not-so-obvious ways—that baptism is, in **some** way, a sign of merit. It's an accomplishment! And if you haven't done it, then there's something **wrong** with you. At some point in her life (and I will admit that this is speculation), raising the question of baptism became somewhat uncomfortable.

Again, I can't say for sure that that was part of her life story, but it does happen. When it does happen, it turns baptism, and the entire Christian life, on its head. It's not an occasion for pride; it's a matter of humble, loving gratitude.

UCC minister Bruce Epperly sounds like a fellow *Star Trek* fan when he says, "Sacraments [like baptism] create a field of force around us and our loved ones that enable God and us to become partners [there's the covenant part] in creative transformation and personal and planetary healing."<sup>3</sup> Baptism is about love and healing. It's not about jockeying for position; it's not about grandstanding.

He continues, saying that "baptism is not an occasion for Christian superiority or exclusivism. There is salvation—and revelation—outside the church." The mystical body of Christ is larger than the visible church. "While sacraments awaken us to God's love, they don't define the scope of God's love."

Earlier, I spoke of the Klingon ritual of R'uustai. I added that Lt. Worf explains its meaning to the boy Jeremy. This enables him to benefit from it. It becomes more than a series of actions involving candles and strange symbols; instead, the ritual becomes a way for him to experience a whole new dimension of life. Losing his mother and becoming an orphan means the end of life as he's known it. The ritual of R'uustai offers the promise of new life.

New life is what the sacrament of baptism is all about. But just as with the Klingon ritual, if there is no understanding and no intention of embracing that new life, then the waters of baptism do little more than simply get us wet.

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<sup>2</sup> which is actually a requirement of the Book of Order, W-2.3011a(1)

<sup>3</sup> [processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-01-08/baptism-jesusfirst-sunday-after-epiphany](http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-01-08/baptism-jesusfirst-sunday-after-epiphany)

Our Book of Order says this about baptism: “In Baptism, we participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection. In Baptism, we die to what separates us from God and are raised to newness of life in Christ. Baptism points us back to the grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ, who died for us and who was raised for us. Baptism points us forward to that same Christ who will fulfill God’s purpose in God’s promised future.” (W-2.3002)

“As circumcision was the sign and symbol of inclusion in God’s grace and covenant with Israel, so Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God’s grace and covenant with the Church.” (W-2.3004) That’s what I was saying earlier about it being the sacrament of entry into the church.

Sometimes people get an impression about baptism. It may sound like, “Hey that’s a pretty good deal! I can get baptized, and totally forget about it!” Not exactly! There’s still that bit about the covenant. There’s still that bit about loving, healing relationships. As we continue with the Book of Order, we also hear this:

“The body of Christ is one, and Baptism is the bond of unity in Christ. As they are united with Christ through faith, Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.” (W-2.3005)

The body of Christ is one. We are one! **Baptism** is the bond of unity in Christ. The community of the baptized is not bound together by nationality, gender, sexual orientation, political orientation, and all of the other junk we come up with. Christ liberates us from that.

There is another reason for being baptized, but I hesitate to mention it, because it involves a concept that has too often been abused and distorted. But here it is: we are baptized because we are obedient. We obey our Lord, who says, as part of the Great Commission in Matthew 28, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19).

I hesitate to mention obedience, because it’s very easy to get the wrong idea about it. Obeying the Lord isn’t the obedience demanded by one who’s just waiting to smack us down. It isn’t blind or mindless obedience. It’s the mutual, loving obedience of one whose eyes are wide open and has come to serve.

In our scripture text, Mark says that John is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). (I said we would look at Jesus getting baptized.) So why is Jesus baptized? Does he need to be forgiven of his sin?

In Matthew’s gospel, John is reluctant to baptize him. He’s wondering about this, too. “But Jesus [answers] him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness’” (3:15). Or as the Revised English Bible puts it: “it is right for us to do all that God requires.”

Remember, “all that God requires” is **not** satisfying the whims of a bully or a tyrant. It is **not** dealing with one who says, “Get out of the way! I don’t need you!” **It is**, however, working along **with** one who lovingly chooses us in bringing all creation to a glorious fulfillment.

Mark doesn’t go into why Jesus is baptized as directly as does Matthew. He **does** tell us that “just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens

torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (vv. 10-11).

Baptism is a public identification with the people of God. It is expressing solidarity! Of course, Jesus’ identification—his bonding—with God’s people receives quite a dramatic display of acceptance. The “heavens dividing” doesn’t occur every day!

At my own baptism, nothing quite so spectacular happened. (At least, no one told me of celestial voices being heard!) I **can** say that I felt as if a weight had been lifted from me. For a good bit of time, my mother told me that I should be baptized. At first, I resisted. But when I made that public statement of joining with the people of God, by bonding in that ritual of water, everything changed. I was a new person; I had embarked on a new life.

There’s something that Matthew in the Great Commission, and Mark in today’s reading, tie with baptism. Luke does the same in Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost, after Peter tells the people about Jesus, they ask, “What should we do?” His response? “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38).

All of them link baptism with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the greatest gift of God. The Spirit **is** God, constantly being given to us—constantly being **poured** into us! The Spirit is everything good and wonderful that we can imagine—and everything that we **cannot** imagine.

We are baptized once, but repentance is a lifelong journey. We are called and invited, over and over again, to repent. That means to have a change of mind, to turn around.

John baptizes with water. We baptize with water. Jesus baptizes with the Spirit. The Spirit is the one who makes that bonding in water effective. The Spirit is the one who gives it power. The Spirit is the one who takes a bunch of dripping wet people and fills them with faith, hope, and love.