

First Congregational Church of Wakefield, United Church of Christ

The Rev. John Tamilio III, Pastor

Sunday, September 29, 2002 — Pentecost XIX

Sermon: "With Water and the Spirit" (Matthew 21:23-32)

In order to be a member of my family, you had to be initiated. I am not talking about my immediate family: me, Sue, Sarah, and Jay. I am referring to the family in which I was raised: the family that consisted of two older brothers. I also have an older sister, but she moved out long before it was safe. Mind you, this has nothing to do with my parents. They were loving, nurturing people. I am speaking solely about the aforementioned brothers. Yes — they were the ones who would dole out tasks (most *sane* people would call it torture) that initiated the baby brother into the family. Unfortunately, unlike most initiation rites, these ones never came to an end. It did not matter how many times I was forced to eat cold spaghetti sauce or was bombarded with shaving cream and raw eggs; such practices needed to be repeated and endured in order for me to become part of that elite club known as *little brotherhood*.

When most people think about initiation rites, they usually think of hazing: having to suffer some cruel and humiliating ritual in order to become part of the popular fraternity on campus or the varsity football team. Other groups have initiation rites as well, but they are typically much more humane and symbolic. Even the Church has an initiation rite — the sacrament of baptism — and, believe it or not, this sacrament (as with most initiation rites) has not been without controversy throughout the history of the Christian Church. It was controversial even before the Church was born. Look at today's Gospel Lesson from Matthew, for example.

This Gospel passage really contains two stories in one. The second story is the one we usually hear preached from pulpits: the parable of the two sons. Look at the first half of the reading, though. Jesus is preaching in the Temple for the last time and the chief priests and elders want to know by what authority is he doing this. Never the one to give a straight answer, Jesus responds with a question of his own: a question regarding baptism. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Now if we continue with the story, we see that Jesus has led the priests and the elders into a paradox: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." Therefore, they do not answer.

We could reflect all day on the meaning of this, and I know that you would love me to do so, but let's just look at the question itself: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Is Jesus talking about his authority here or is he talking about the meaning of baptism? Maybe both, but look at the dual context in which he places baptism: human origin and divine origin. This is interesting, especially to young doctoral students trying to make a name for themselves in sacramental theology.

As many of you know, my Uncle Chi Chi died last week. His wake and funeral

were held last Monday and Tuesday, hence my absence for those of you who tried to call me. Funerals and weddings are the two big occasions (aside from annual reunions) when my extended, Italian family gets together. First of all, it's loud. It's very loud. Second, there's a lot of affection — and a lot of catching up. Now a couple of weeks ago, I made some comments about how I find Nascar racing as exciting as root canal. The tables were turned last week. My cousins feel the same way about my studies. "So, Johnny," they said (everyone in my family calls me Johnny, but you don't have to; Father John works just fine), "So, Johnny, what are you doing nowadays?" I was asked this question about a hundred times. I told them that I was still a minister in Wakefield, New Hampshire (way up north according to them) and that I was working on my doctorate at Boston University. "Oh, what are you studying?" "Theology," I said. "I figured that, you moron," one of my cousins said. "What is your area of research?" Now I can talk about my area of research all day. It's my passion. I have to keep reminding myself, though, that most people do not feel the same way. "I am studying the form and function of the sacraments in the United Church of Christ by comparing our liturgical traditions and related scholarship to lay perceptions." "*And you chose to do this?*" one cousin exclaimed. "Yup, it's my Nascar," I wanted to say.

Most people (including my wife, who has to hear about it all the time) do not find sacramental theology exciting. Interestingly enough, the sacraments are the very things that define who we are as the Church.

"Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Jesus asked. What does he mean here, exactly? Baptism is one of the strangest of all the sacraments. Some people practice this sacrament the way we do: in a sanctuary by a font. Other traditions do it by a lake shore by fully immersing the candidate in the water. And still there are other practices. The meaning of this sacrament is controversial, too. Some people feel that baptism washes away our sins. Others feel that it is the way in which we are initiated into the Church Universal (which is the popular UCC belief). Still others believe that through baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and many ancient traditions believed that baptism was the prerequisite for salvation. In any event, what usually happens is that the minister tells the story of Jesus' baptism, prays, and then he or she performs the rite in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus instructed his disciples in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. And still we, just like the chief priests and elders of 2000 years ago, are confronted with Jesus' question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" There is no easy answer to this, but I think the best way to understand it is by looking at one of the greatest twentieth century theologians: Karl Barth. (My wife is sick of hearing about him, too, but if she has to hear about him, so do you.) Actually, Barth's take on all this is very interesting.

If you sometimes think that I am long winded, let me show you something by way of comparison. These are all the sermons that I have preached since you called me to be your pastor three years and three months ago. And these are the books that Barth used to explain his theology. Interestingly enough, it is in the thinnest volume that he talks about the sacrament of baptism — and when he does, he talks about two things: divine origin and human origin.

Simply put: Barth believed that we are baptized with both water and the Holy Spirit, but the two are separate acts. The primary act is baptism by the Holy Spirit, which is what God (and God alone) does. This is the true moment of baptism. This is the way in which we receive God's grace. After this, we are baptized with water (a human act) and through this part of the ritual we become part of the Church and begin our new, ethical lives as Christians — as people transformed into new creations.

So, in answer to Jesus' question — “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” — we must say the former: *the baptism of John comes from heaven; it is an act of God and that is where Jesus gets his authority.*

This is a radical way of looking at baptism. Typically, we think that it is something *we* do. In other words, when the minister or the priest blesses the water (just as when the minister or the priest consecrates the elements during the Communion liturgy) it is *then* that we believe *they* become official and real. It is not by human hands (be they ordained or lay) that these rites become sacred. It is by God. Clergy are the ones trained in the meaning of these rites to ensure that theological integrity is maintained and clergy are the ones through which God works (in some ways), but *it is still God who makes the sacraments sacred and it is still God that calls us into the Church.*

Is this important? You bet — and it isn't just important for Ph.D. students. Any church that forgets that God is the origin of all that we do flirts with idolatry. We are called into the Church, because God calls us. We are forgiven our sins, because God forgives us. We receive the blessings of the Holy Spirit, because it is God's Spirit which God bestows upon us. We are saved, because God saves us. It is God who is in total control, not us.

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” This is a question that we need to keep asking ourselves — and it is a question that we need to keep answering. Amen.