

## **I Have Decided to Follow Jesus But Not Get Baptized Yet**

Joel 2:21-27, 1 Timothy 2:1-6 Thanksgiving Communion by Patty Friesen Oct.13/24

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, Apostle Paul reminds his mentee Timothy that Christ comes from the side of human beings to act as mediator on our behalf with God.

Slide 1 - In this second sermon in our trilogy on the 7 Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists - we look at Jesus as our mediator in #3: As a church, we are a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and *follow Christ in life*.

In a recent meeting of Mennonite ministers and congregational chairs in Saskatoon, we bemoaned the fact that no one seems to want to get baptized or join the church anymore. In the old days you had to get baptized and join the church before you could get married or take communion. Nowadays our Mennonite churches are practicing open table communion so you don't have to be baptized and for sure we don't make people get baptized before they get married. Some churches are exploring different models of membership - moving more to covenant model - those who are present and involved including those not baptized are members as opposed to a formal membership through baptism. That creates all kinds of interesting questions.

There are lots of reasons people don't get baptized. One introverted adult said if he had to get up in front of church, he wasn't getting baptized. I said we could read a statement or baptize him in his home with some deacons but he's not having it. Maybe we need to talk about baptism more and take the mystique or sense of perfection out of it. I've been afraid to talk about baptism or put pressure on young people like the pressure I had on me growing up to accept Jesus as Saviour and get baptized, but

despite the pressure, my baptism meant something to me at age 15. There were six in my baptism class - my sister and I, my friend and her sister and two guys from church - one who just got out of prison and was trying to change his life. Surrounded by our close-knit little church and my parents and grandparents - it was a feel-good moment. I felt close to God and felt like I belonged to the church. Afterwards, as a church we washed feet together and took communion. It didn't mean that I had arrived and become a perfect Christian - in fact it was more the beginning of wrestling with the church over wearing the prayer covering and leadership for women and wrestling with God over other difficulties in life. Maybe baptism is an invitation to courageously wrestle with important things.

Fellow Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler's, middle child Wick, announced recently that he was ready to explore baptism. Melissa says, "over the course of his life Wick has watched many people enter the fellowship of the church. He's sung hymns on the lip of a swollen river. He's watched as I submerge bodies into the waters in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He has prayed over the dripping, beaming faces that stumbled back onto the bank, suddenly new. (May 2024 Christian Century)

We were in an awkward position. He's the pastor's kid, and at the time no one else had come forward to request this rite. But we forged ahead with a plan to explore baptism together, just the two of us. We'd talk about baptism in the Bible and ask questions about what we heard. We would invite others to tell us about their baptism and how it shaped their lives. We would talk about our spiritual ancestors who died confronting the practice of infant baptism that defined the church in the 16th century.

We carved out space on Sunday mornings to sit and talk, to read and ask, to listen and question. One morning we walked around the church, interviewing people whose paths we crossed. They were surprised but mostly delighted to talk with us about their baptism.

The next Sunday I made a set of cards with words like war, work, and money. Several members of the congregation joined us. Wick asked each person how baptism shaped their lives in one of these areas. I could see my son's eyes widen as one man shared how, for him, a baptismal life meant letting go of a career that made a lot of money and instead joining a helping profession. Someone else shared about how nonviolence means more than not going to war—we are called to love our enemies. That night, as we snuggled before lights out, Wick turned his head to me. “Mom, I don't think I'm ready to be baptized. You're not sad, are you?” I told him no, that I was proud of him for discerning that he still had questions, that he still needed to be convinced this Jesus life is a good idea. “When we're baptized, we're saying 'I love you 'back to the one who has always loved us and always will,” I told him. “And saying 'I love you 'makes a kind of life. Those words make a home.”

“Mom, getting baptized seems like getting a tattoo. If you're going to do it, you want to be sure.” I smiled as he ran his hand over the tattoo of the annunciation on my shoulder, a decision that was several decades in the making. “That's a good metaphor, Wick. But we'll never be able to figure everything out. Maybe this is the question: Do I want to keep figuring out my life with Jesus and with other people who also love Jesus?”

“That makes sense,” he replied. “Did I tell you what I built in Minecraft today?” And like that, the baptism conversation was done. Believers 'baptism traditions are often

criticized, and with good reason, for demanding that catechumens get the words and concepts right, a kind of faith test one must pass with flying colors.

Rather than spiritual acumen, the Mennonite Church looks to the call stories in the gospels to interpret our baptismal practice. In one of those stories Simon Peter, James, and John are fishing when Jesus happens upon them. They recognize him, and that recognition calls forth an act—they leave behind their nets. But the nets of this life are only now coming into view for my child. What kind of life will he forge? What other gods await to demand his allegiance?

One day, seemingly out of nowhere, a Roman centurion named Marcellus of Tangier threw down his soldier's belt holding his weapons. When tried before a judge who asked what madness caused this blasphemous rejection of Roman military power, Marcellus is said to have declared, "No madness possesses those who fear the Lord. . . for it is not fitting that a Christian, who fights for Christ his Lord, should fight for the armies of this world." Marcellus was executed.

It is likely Marcellus was preparing for baptism. Over the course of his catechesis, he discovered who Jesus is and determined that the life of a soldier was incompatible with that of a Christian. Marcellus required clarity not about Jesus alone but about the life that is wrought from this encounter, the stuff that is thrown down before entering the waters of baptism.

I spoke to a friend, also a Mennonite pastor, about Wick's decision to wait for baptism. "So the baptism preparation was a success," he said, and I agreed. We both hope Wick will choose baptism one day, but we also know that in those weeks of discernment, he was offered space to encounter and reject the peculiar life we live as

Christians. Believers' baptism is pacifism; it's one way we form community without violence. When those seeking baptism say "not yet," we know that we have not coerced or baited them, that we have not forced someone into a life of faith.

As it is, Wick will need to be convinced—convinced by the lives he sees that this baptismal life is one worth living. I take this call seriously, both as his pastor and his mom.

I also know baptism is the work of many. When Wick was a baby I held him in front of me, his chunky legs kicking at the air. Before the church I offered my child to God's care. The church surrounded him and made a promise: they would give him reason for the faith they had. I believed them then, and I believe them today. As he grows, he'll discover the nets of this life. But I trust that the people of our church will show Wick how to lay them down, that together we will live convincing lives of faith. I trust that someday, by God's immense and unknowable grace, the one I dip into the waters of baptism will be my child." End quote.

Nowadays young people move away from and return to Christian experience, albeit Christianity with a difference, says Cynthia Wallace in *Literary Lives of Simone Weil*, p.16. Returnees to Christianity come with a vision of communal caring, mystery and wonder rather than moral or institutional authority. We have to release our young people to find their way away from and hopefully return towards new and emerging expressions of Christian faith in a Mennonite perspective. That's the hard part - letting them go and decide "not yet" to baptism.

As part of the exploring and trying on the belief, behaviour and belonging of our Christian faith, we invite young people to participate in open table communion with us;

to let Jesus take hold of all of us even as we are deciding to take hold of him. It is our hope that adults and young people will choose baptism but until that day, they are always a part of us, growing with us and growing in Christ.

Let us pray through the Thanksgiving Communion Liturgy. Please respond in bold print.