



## First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

222 North Hanover St., Moweaqua, IL 62550 Phone: 217-768-4860 [www.umcmow.com](http://www.umcmow.com)

### To Fulfill All Righteousness

### Mark 1: 4-11

Today is the Sunday the Church sets aside to commemorate the baptism of our Lord. There are many stories about baptism--particularly about baptisms where people are totally immersed in the water. You probably have heard the one about the man who is stumbling through the woods totally drunk when he comes upon a Baptist preacher baptizing people in the river. In his alcohol-induced stupor, the man proceeds to walk into the water and bumps into the preacher.

The preacher turns around and is almost overcome by the smell of alcohol. He asks the inebriated man, "Are you ready to find Jesus?"

The man answers, "Yes, I am."

So the preacher grabs him and dunks him in the water. He pulls him up and asks the man, "Brother, have you found Jesus?"

The man replies, "No, I haven't found Jesus. "

The preacher, shocked at the answer, dunks him into the water again for a little longer this time. He again pulls him out of the water and asks, "Have you found Jesus, my brother?"

The man again answers, "No, I haven't found Jesus. "

By this time the preacher is at his wits' end and dunks him in the water again—but this time he holds him down for about 30 seconds. The man is kicking his arms and legs.

The preacher pulls him up and asks, "For the love of God, have you found Jesus?"

The drunk wipes his eyes and catches his breath and says to the preacher,

"Are you sure this is where he fell in.?"

Today I am going to talk about Baptism and I am going to begin by asking What is Baptism all about? Why do we do it? Who should be baptized? How should it be done?? The answers to these questions have defined and sometimes divided the various denominations of the Christian Church for a thousand years.

Now believe it or not, John the Baptist was not the first person to use baptism. Originally baptism was a Jewish ritual performed to initiate converts to the Jewish religion. The baptism of the Jews signified a washing away of an old way of life...a new birth from Gentile to Jew. Later on, after the death and resurrection of Jesus the early church insisted that the baptized person actually assume a new identity....a new name...new friends, behaviors even new families. In many cases people even received new clothes to wear. Baptism was the beginning of a new life quite literally.

Which brings me back to John the Baptist. John was doing a new thing here. He was not baptizing converts...he was baptizing Jews, people who were already in the flock. But he was not authorized by the religious authorities to do so... and that really ticked them off. By his own words, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This was not the way the Jews handled this matter of sin... they were into animal sacrifice... John was proclaiming a doctrine of personal repentance and a washing away

of sin ...a doctrine that was different from the way things had always been done and no one had ordained him to do so.

And then along comes Jesus. As many of you know already John the Baptist and Jesus were second cousins. John probably knew all about the divine activity that preceded the Birth of Jesus. He had seen the exemplary life Jesus led. And so, according to the book of Matthew, no one is more surprised than John when Jesus presents himself for Baptism at the River Jordan. Jesus was already a Jew ...so he did not need converting...and he had lived a life without sin so he did not need to repent of anything. As far as John was concerned if anybody should be baptized by anyone...it was John who ought to be baptized by Jesus... .

So why did Jesus decide he needed to be baptized...at this time and at this place? Well again according to Matthew 3: Jesus says it was proper for him to be baptized "in order fulfill all righteousness." In other words, it was something that needed to be done because it was the will of God. And immediately after Jesus is baptized we see two things... First we see the official heavenly announcement in verse 11 ..."This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". Although all the signs must have been there throughout the childhood of Jesus and his young adult years ... it was not until the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove and Jesus is proclaimed to be The Son of God by a voice from Heaven that God's official stamp of approval is signed, sealed and delivered. The obedient Son who came to be baptized is commissioned as God's Anointed One. . And the second thing we need to see is that after his baptism and the Heavenly proclamation, the life that Jesus had lived as the Son of a carpenter, fell away, and he took on a new mantle and mission...a new purpose and a new life... as the Messiah, the Son of God.

So what does the Baptism of Jesus have to do with our baptisms? Although many try to reduce the meaning of this event in the life of Christ to a baptism formula, it really is more than a how-to set of rules about the correct procedures and methods for baptism. After all, it really can't be seen as a set of baptisms instructions because the Bible doesn't concern itself with the details of whether Jesus bent at the waist, whether he leaned forwards or backwards into the water, or if he bent his knees to get dunked.

It just tells us the important stuff. That this Baptism was the God-recognized initiation or commissioning of the ministry of Jesus and that Jesus willingly submitted out of obedience to God.

Later Jesus instituted Baptism as a sacrament-- a sacred moment, a means of grace, bestowing the forgiveness of sins, marking the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and an initiation of a new life for all who are baptized.

OK, well that is all simple enough. So far, there are very few disagreements. But then comes the big questions... Who shall be baptized and how are we going to do it. And it is precisely these questions that have cost countless of thousands of people their lives through persecution and war. And it is also the reason why there are so many Protestant churches today.

Let's start with this matter of the methods of baptism. How do we do it.? . In the Methodist Church we baptize by sprinkling, pouring or immersion. All three methods are legitimate forms of baptism...because the word "baptism" means to wash. And as you all know there are more than one ways to wash ourselves using varying amounts of water. The important thing is not how we wash ourselves.. but that we get clean. Right? By the same vain it is not the wetness of our baptism that matters to God as much as the witness that we give to our baptisms.

If a person is baptized by full immersion and then never darkens a door of a church or picks up a Bible...Then they are giving a poor witness to their baptism. Agreed? But if a person is brought to the font as a baby and is sprinkled (as they say) then goes to Sunday School, learns the stories of the Bible and comes to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior and eventually makes a profession of faith at their confirmation...then goes on to grow into a dedicated disciple... wouldn't you say they give a great witness to their baptism?

Hey I was baptized as a baby as were many of you...the fact that we are here today proves It's not the wetness of a baptism that matters to God as much as the witness.

And then we come to the matter of who should be baptized.: Well, I always feel like the proper place to start is to check out practices of the early church... How did they baptize? After all they were the ones originally instructed by Jesus. Interestingly enough. When we read in the Bible and the Didache, an manual written by leaders of the early church, we learn that they used to baptize whole households at the same time ...and a household quite naturally included children. In fact, according to 1 Cor. 15: 29 there were some who even had themselves baptized in the name of people who had died. So apparently, the early church felt that Baptism had great power, a power that did not come from the baptized person, but a power that came from God. Baptism is not a reward bestowed on those who have earned it as much as it is a gift from God upon the unworthy. It is a gift of grace freely given by God.

In fact, Martin Luther used to say that babies were the perfect people to be baptized because they could never be so foolish as to think they had done anything to earn membership in God's family. Because you see that is another thing we need to realize about that Baptism. Baptism is important for all God's children young or old because it signifies that we are part of the family of God. It doesn't mean that God loves us more than anyone else. It doesn't mean that God is going to surround us with an Impenetrable shield that will keep us from all harm. It means, though, that we become part of God's covenantal relationship with humanity. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--as well as Simon Peter and St. Paul and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth--that same God is our God and we are His people...not because we have done anything to deserve this privilege...it is only ours because God gives it to us freely out of his love for us.

Still and all there are always those who are uncomfortable with infant baptism. . John Wesley used to say that infant baptism is nothing new...it comes in through the same door as Circumcision. In the Jewish faith that Jesus was born into, this special covenantal relationship was bestowed on Jewish males when they were 8 days old through the act of Circumcision. When we baptize babies we are following the example God provided when God initiated Circumcision. We aren't surgically removing anything, but we are following the same theology --- the belief that God deems babies as worthy recipients of citizenship in his kingdom.

Which when you think about it is also true for our country. How did you become an American citizen? Did you take a test? Did you take classes? Did you have to recite a loyalty oath? No most of you became citizens when you were born. Your knew nothing about it at the time, but as a new born baby born in the United States you were as much an American citizen as any 65 year old senator or the President of the United States. Sure you didn't receive full voting rights at the time, but as Americans we understood that as time went on you would grow into those rights and responsibilities. So it is with baptism. Through baptism, a gift of God, infants are claimed by Jesus Christ as citizens of the kingdom of God, and for the rest of their lives the baptized child will grow into that citizenship. It is our job as a church to assist all baptized children and their parents in

accomplishing that goal. After all baptism is all about being born again "of water and of spirit" into the kingdom of God. When we baptize a child into the Christian faith we initiate them into the household of God, we claim them for Jesus Christ, we announced to the world ...that this little child belongs to God...and that God's all powerful love now surrounds them and as they grow they live in the love of God, which nothing..in life or in eternity can defeat.

Which brings me to another point that needs emphasizing. Just like it was for Jesus, **Baptism is an initiation... a starting point that marks the beginning of your new relationship with God and God's church.** It is something that is only done once...at the beginning of our walk with God. Just think about the nature of initiation rites... Some of you were initiated into the Masons, some of you were initiated into the Scouts, others were initiated into the Lions club or the Kiwanis or perhaps a college sorority or fraternity. The point is when were you initiated? At the beginning of your association with these organizations. Right? Do you ever go back and get re-initiated? No, of course, not... Initiation is something you do at the beginning... Once you grow into the rights and responsibilities of full membership you never need to do that again.

I am always amazed that there are people who feel that they need to be re-baptized.. because the very fact that they are asking for this re-baptizing proves that their first baptism worked real well. As Methodists we believe that the Spirit of the God begins to indwell in the heart of every baptized person...and the job of that Spirit is to help the young believer grow in faith and understanding of God. When babies are baptized we recognize that they will need to grow in faith and as a church we take vows promising we will help these children grow in that direction. When they enter the 6<sup>th</sup> grade we give them more intense instruction hoping that they will make their own profession of faith.and when they do, we confirm them in their baptismal vows. But that is not the end of their faith walk—it is only another milestone on a much longer journey.

Well I could go on and on and say a lot more about Baptism and I probably will on another day. But the thing I want you to remember, is that Baptism is a gift freely given to all who would receive it. . It is a beginning, an initiation, a starting point from which we are expected to grow closer to God And it doesn't matter how you do it... it's not the wetness of your baptism that matters to God...it's the witness you give to your Baptism that counts the most...to fulfill all righteousness