

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
January 7, 2017
Acts 19:1-7

Be Ready for an Epiphany

I was baptized at a Church of the Nazarene when I was around twelve years old. I was baptized in what is called the “believer’s baptism.” This means that I personally chose to be baptized rather than my parents deciding for me. There are some churches, mostly the ones who tend towards fundamentalism, that encourage believers’ baptisms. Some churches won't baptize unless the person makes their own decision to get baptized. If you remember your Bible stories, Jesus wasn't baptized until he chose to do so in the Jordan River by John. So, there is a scriptural basis for the "believer's baptism."

Now, in the Christian faith, there are baptisms done by Catholics, Protestants, non-denominational churches, churches with a liberal faith and churches with a fundamentalist faith. One thing I want you to know is that here in the United Church of Christ we accept everyone’s baptism, no matter where, or how, they were baptized. People in the UCC tend to think, for the most part, but not all, that baptism is the outward sign of God’s grace and love for that child or that teenager, or that adult no matter how old. Mostly, in the UCC, we don’t think you absolutely have to be baptized to, as they say, “go to heaven.” Mostly, people in the UCC like to get baptized or have their child baptized to say to the church and to the world that we are people of faith and Jesus Christ is the head of our faith. Also, when a person joins a UCC church and becomes a voting member of the congregation, when they stand up here before the congregation and join the church they are also affirming their baptism. In fact, in the words we speak here at Maple Street Church when a person joins we verbally acknowledge that we are affirming our baptism.

Now we read from the Book of Acts this morning that a long time ago there were some folks that thought one baptism was “better” than another! Paul was one of those guys. Paul thought those disciples down in Ephesus had come up a little short in their baptism credentials. I’m not sure how that would make you feel, but if I had told you earlier in this sermon that Alden or Norma’s baptism wasn’t as good as mine, I’m guessing that I wouldn’t be too popular around here. Tar and feathers come to mind! In fact, did you know that the first report of "tarring and

feathering" was done to another guy named "Smith?" Yup, in 1766 sea captain William Smith was tarred and feathered in Virginia for reporting a smuggler to the royal authorities.

(<https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/12/5-myths-tarring-feathering/>)

Paul was telling these good Ephesians that John's baptism which they had experienced wasn't quite up to snuff because they had not received the Holy Spirit. I wonder what Jesus would say about that since he was baptized by John? What are we to make of this? Well, in this modern day and age almost everyone's education into the Christian faith includes learning about the Trinity, or the Triune God, the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," as we say when we baptize someone. We are not worshipping three Gods, just one God that has transcendent powers, human love, understanding and empathy, and an advocate spirit that helps convey God's love to and through us and helps us understand deep within our psyches and our souls that we are loved by God and should pass that love onto others.

Frankly, folks, I think both John's baptism of "repentance," or "turning around your life," or "radical change," as we read in Eugene Peterson's version of the scripture this morning and Jesus' later baptism with the Holy Spirit are both profoundly critical and important to one who follows Jesus Christ. For if faith in Jesus Christ doesn't make a difference in you life, doesn't make you want to be the most loving, compassionate, kind, and justice-seeking person you can be, than why do we all do what we do on Sunday mornings?

Yes, we, each one of us, are probably here because we love this community. We are not drafted or required to attend church, we choose it. No one requires you to be here and be part of this worshipping community. So, in addition to wanting to be part of a community, I would be bold as to say that you are here because there is some voice in your soul, some inspiration in your heart of love, that is nudging you to get up on a Sunday morning, or any morning, and be part of the church, for being part of the "Body of Christ." That is faith, folks, because modern culture, more and more, doesn't think it's all that hip. God Bless you for listening to that little voice of the Holy Spirit within you and for also wanting to change your life in the way of loving more and being here this morning or taking part in anything we do here at the church. If you would like baptized because you have not, let's do it! If you want to join this community of people of faith, you are welcome here. If you don't want to join, for whatever reason, you are welcome and loved here, too! Jesus never, ever rejected anyone and neither do we.

I hope we all will listen to that still small voice within each one of us calling us to do more in this world than just get by, just earn a living and pay the bills. I hope we all know that when we practice the love of God in our life and to your neighbors that we are surpassing, that we are transcending, what we can do without the love of God in our lives. It's hard to be self-centered and selfish when you love God, when you have faith that there is something more to life than just material existence and gain, and that loving God and following Jesus motivates you to want to help and seek justice and equality for all living beings, and I include all creatures of the God's creation in that category. It is not an easy road folks. The other paths you can follow in your life will be smoother and with fewer mountains to climb. Jesus didn't stay in that rose garden, he went up that hill and gave his all because he loved, he forgave, and he wanted to show generations and generations beyond his earthly life that there was something more that could be accomplished and that even with the greatest pain we could suffer and experience there was always hope for new life, for renewal, for resurrection. Be ready always for Holy Spirit's epiphanies of love to set your love in motion to help heal a broken world. Amen.

