

Genesis 1:1-5
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Rev. Nathan Anderson
Baptism of our Lord
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Our church office occasionally gets phone calls and emails asking if we will do nonmember weddings, funerals or baptisms. The short answer is “yes,” and we strive to welcome people into the congregation. Baptism makes one an official member. Weddings and funerals don’t, but I confess my personal hope in how God’s Holy Spirit combined with our hospitality might inspire these families to keep coming. Occasionally they do, although the majority does not. While I’m underwhelmed or disappointed at times, I still want to give my personal best, and would not want a perception of inhospitality to become the reason a person would choose not to attend.

I remember one of our past secretaries responding to a young woman inquiring if we do weddings for non-members, and if so, how much it costs. She responded: “This depends on a number of choices the bride and groom would make. Have you met Pastor Anderson or visited All Saints before?” “Oh no,” said the young woman, “I don’t think you have to go to church to believe in God.”

This is a typical attitude of many people in our society, who view a congregation as a catering service for their occasional needs. It’s a consumer mentality, and the world is one big mall for shopping convenience. And oh lucky us if we get picked as their vendor of choice.

No wonder there are many churches which won’t do non-member weddings. Or else they place a hefty price tag on use of their facilities to command a little more respect and turn away those who are willing to spend more on flowers than to support a church’s ministry.

Let me explain my perspective. It is my hope when a young couple is seeking a place to get married, there is also a possibility they will discover a church home to help support the spiritual base of their new foundation as a family. I think healthy evangelism has an open door policy to welcome new people into our congregation’s ministry.

Admittedly, I resist the notion of becoming another caterer for the consumer market. Nor do I relish being a chaplain for one night stand occasions. I invest my time with a couple on behalf of this congregation’s ministry, hoping to help guide the commitments they make to each other, and discover relationships in worship which will enhance their faith.

When someone says to me “I don’t think you have to go to church to believe in God,” I have to laugh. Many people believe there is a God and don’t go to church. But do they believe God? Do they believe God’s Word which says we are to come together to pray, to sing spiritual songs, to be in Christian fellowship? Even Satan believes there is a God. He just doesn’t believe God’s Word, and doesn’t want others to believe it either. There’s a world of difference between those who say they believe in God and those who believe God’s Word. And their witness makes a heavenly difference as well.

All Saints get calls from people asking if I’ll do Baptisms for non-member families, and how much do we charge. Yes, we welcome the celebration of any Baptism, and there is certainly no charge for this privilege. But make no mistake; every child of God we baptize becomes a member of this congregation and a part of the larger Christian family. It’s not a private affair, but a mutual commitment of relationship and witness. This church responds, saying “We welcome you into the Lord’s family, the body of Christ, a child of the same Heavenly Father, and a worker with us in the Kingdom of God.” The family of the Baptized will be instructed: “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify our Father in Heaven.”

Parents promise to bring their child to worship, and adults commit themselves as part of the Communion of Saints. Together we confess to be the holy Catholic Church, our need for the forgiveness of sins, our belief in the resurrection of the dead, and our hope for life everlasting. This is the Christian faith. There's nothing optional about these essential beliefs.

People who decide to tailor-make their religion are self-absorbed, believing they're basically good, occasionally needing a little boost from their old friend Jesus or that big guy in the sky. If they really blow it big-time, then a hasty confession of guilt would be in order for some pat on the head to be forgiven. Their objective is to feel good about themselves and get back in the driver's seat. By those rules for living, it's quite understandable how church is merely an option. So is the Bible, because worldly rules don't match what Scripture has to say.

Our Baptism is the belief that we need to have God in the driver's seat of our lives. We believe we are continually tempted by sin, and need daily to be forgiven and washed clean by the spiritual waters of Baptism. We don't come to worship to attend church, but to be renewed as the church community of faith.

On our Church Council retreat this weekend, we discussed many goals for ministry in this coming year, and affirmed how our basic mission together is to know Christ, and make Christ known. We need to remember as we leave worship, then our service really begins. This is what our Baptism means. If you believe God, then you know we aren't just called to attend church, but to be the church.

John the Baptist preached how Baptism offers forgiveness. It's a good starting point. More people should wake up to recognize their sinfulness, even though it's not a popular subject in today's world. Yep, we need to change our ways. But we're missing an obvious point in today's Gospel. Why would Jesus step forward to receive John's Baptism of forgiveness? He is the only person born without sin. Surely Baptism wasn't necessary for Him.

Jesus came to the Baptismal waters as a sign of identification. . so we might hear God's voice proclaim He is God's Son. Jesus was baptized to identify with us as His Body the Church, so we might know we too are God's children by belief in Him. Baptism is a declaration of our acceptance of our Heavenly Father's love, proclaiming our salvation comes through being part of the Body of Jesus. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that God can look at you and me and declare "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased."

Baptism identifies us as loved and forgiven by God, allowing us to make new beginnings each day. Yes, we need Christ's blessings at weddings, funerals, and other milestones. The premise of ministry is not just that we believe in God, but as Christians, we believe God's Word. The commission & personal calling we have declares: "Let your light so shine before others, they may see your good works and glorify our Father in heaven."

Amen.