

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: "Baptism is . . . "
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

I've been baptized several times, but not as a baby. My father didn't believe in infant baptism. Like a lot of Christians, my dad believed the person should be old enough to know what they're doing, to decide for themselves, to know what they believe. That's why in a lot of Churches it's called "believers' baptism," or "adult baptism," something that happens when you're old enough make a "decision," a conscious, intentional, very adult decision. To accept Christ, to follow Christ, to be Christlike.

So, when it was decided that I was ready; I got baptized at the First Italian Baptist Church of Brooklyn. You see, our little Congregational Church in Queens didn't have a proper baptismal tank. They had a font like ours over there. It had a small bowl with a little bit of water, just enough for the pastor to dip their fingers in and touch the baby's forehead. Churches that do the full body, grown-up immersion dunking baptism, those Churches have a tank, usually behind the altar, maybe 10 feet wide and 4 feet deep, like a small swimming pool. So one Sunday night, folks from a little Church in Queens piled into a rented school bus, and we all drove to Brooklyn for my baptism.

Now, if you've never seen such a thing, let me describe it. In olden times, folks got baptized in rivers, lakes, oceans. I've done all that in America and around the

world. Just like that great baptism scene in the George Clooney movie, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" People wading into the water up to their hips, and the choir singing on the shore, I take the person in my arms, one hand in the small of their back, one hand holding their hands, then I pull them back, lay them flat out on the water, water cascading over their entire body. Then I lift them back up, pray over them, and grab the next one.

I've baptized 500 that way in one day in the Congo. Several times I've done over 100 in one day in India. I did over 50 teenagers up in Vermont, and let me tell you, even in July, those Vermont mountain streams are ice cold. And baptizing 50 kids takes a long time. That day in Vermont, about halfway through, two canoes full of naked people came down the river, stopped a while, watched the proceedings, then (thank goodness) paddled on. I have no idea who was more surprised—my newly baptized teenagers or the naked canoeists, but we all got along.

What I remember of my own baptism, well, you have to know that my father was the truest example of the "absent-minded professor." Always was. So that night, at the First Italian Baptist Church, my father pushes me under the water . . . and starts to preach, forgetting that I was still down there, underwater, until I started yanking on his leg.

So how did baptism become such a big deal? Well, as we heard in our Scripture, Jesus got baptized, and we Christians want to be like Jesus. Plus, he said to do it. But other than ritual, or duty, what is its lasting power? So that 2,000 years later, people still do it?

The classic definition of this New-Testament-like, Jesus-like "believer's baptism" is that "baptism is an outward sign of an inward change." *An outward sign of an inward change.* In other words, at some point in your life, you make a life change, a big change, a seismic change. You take yourself out of the center of every equation, and you try your best to put God at the center. You've already wrestled this through, maybe for a long time. You've already made your decision; you've already changed. But then you want to go public. You want people to know, to see, to share with you. So, in Church, in front of everybody, in a big tank up behind the altar, or in a river surrounded by all your friends and naked canoeists, you take part in this "outward sign of your inward change."

As I said, half the Christians in the world do it that way, led by, you won't be surprised, "the Baptists," named after Jesus's cousin "John the Baptist." The backstory to today's Scripture is that John the Baptist was a rebellious loner, a bit of a wild man, a spiritual and political renegade, which eventually got him beheaded. But before he was beheaded, he was very popular. He stood in the

Jordan River, telling people to change, to change radically, to stop the bad stuff they were doing, start the good stuff that they should be doing.

At which point he invited folks to “wade in the water,” as the old Gospel song puts it. To enter the Jordan River, get pushed down, let the water cascade over them, to be dunked, immersed, baptized.

People loved it, flocked to him to do it. Including, to his amazement, Jesus! His cousin, Jesus. The Messiah, Jesus. Someone who didn’t need to get dunked. But Jesus wanted to, and I understand that. It’s a powerful, beautiful, personal, emotional, symbolic action. And it’s hard to miss the symbolism, the cleansing power of water, the washing away of whatever past we need washed away. To walk into a large body of water after acknowledging your very human frailty, your sins, your mistakes, and your wrongs; and then to go down under that water, every inch of your body fully immersed; and then stand up, believing, knowing that your past is truly past, your wrongs and hurts are gone, over, your sins are forgiven

Well, no wonder the favorite hymns in Christian faith are
“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Or
*“Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid’st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!”*

And, historically, what we come to are the waters of baptism. We look at our lives. We make a decision. We change. We get baptized.

Forgive a silly analogy. It’s summer. I wear a lot of light-colored sport coats. I also write a lot, with red, black, and green Pilot Pens. Which I put in my jacket pocket, usually without putting the lid back on. Which means every two weeks I take my favorite summer sport jackets to my favorite cleaner. Guiltily, sheepishly, stupidly. The woman at the counter shakes her head. You can imagine my relief when I go back, and they smile at me, even laugh, and hand me a good-as-new, wiped-clean, no-stain, light-colored sports coat. “Redeemed” is the Biblical word for that. “Saved.” King David wrote in Psalm 51, “Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.” And he knew a thing or two about sin. I’m glad for cleaned-up, stain-free sports coats. Imagine a cleaned-up, stain-free life.

But if half of Christianity baptizes that way, mature, thinking, believing people immersed in large bodies of water, what about the other half? That would be us. We baptize babies, just like today, William Christopher Collison. We call it “infant baptism,” a “sprinkling” or “Christening.” My guess is that it came about because of infant mortality and bad theology. For centuries people believed that

unbaptized people didn't go to heaven. "To prevent that, let's baptize babies ASAP," some enterprising clergyman decided. The more profound explanation for infant baptism is good theology: Grace."

Smarter thinkers than I have stated that baptizing babies is the purest example of God's grace in all of Christianity. Just look at what just happened. A little boy, very young, just got baptized, initiated into the Christian faith, welcomed into our Church family. On the basis of what? You notice his parents had to say something, the Godparents had questions thrown at them, all of you made a promise, but William? Nothing. No tests, no preparation, nothing to recite or memorize or promise. Our little William knows next to nothing about anything, much less about God, Jesus, Church, faith, the Bible. And yet, with no knowledge, no experience, we all just threw open our arms and let him in.

He's full-blown one of us. One hundred percent Grace. God loves us just because. We love William just because. That's "Grace." So the power of "infant baptism" is that on a regular basis we get this living proof of God's grace right here in front of us.

Just like with "believers' baptism" in big waters, our infant baptism is a powerful, emotional, tangible, personal symbol that we can't miss. One is the cleansing power of God's love. One is the cleansing love of God's power.

I know the rumors. Christianity is dead. Western Civilization is dying. Churches are empty and closing. Nobody believes anymore. None of which is true. And certainly one clear place we see serious commitment is with baptism. People take baptisms very seriously in this Church. They plan for them, family and friends travel long distances to be here, Godparents are chosen with care, the whole group comes to Church, and there are lovely parties afterward.

Much more so than earlier in my career. People used to insist on having the baptism after Church or no Church, or on a day other than Sunday, privately. Or if it was in Church, people got up and left as soon as the baptism was over! Or five people would show up for the baptism in Church, but 75 would show up for the booze and food afterward. Not here. Not now. Baptisms are important. We see this all year long, year after year. We visit moms and dads in the hospital within hours of the birth, and they're already talking about the baptism.

Another proof is with our Confirmation. Every year our Confirmation class has kids who were never baptized. So on Confirmation Sunday, we stop everything. We take whoever wasn't baptized over to the baptismal font, and we baptize them. You might think this would be awkward. You've got 40 8th-graders over there ready to get confirmed, and then we isolate three or four, take them off into a corner and baptize them. But it's not awkward. No one ever resists or shows the

slightest embarrassment. I do threaten to pick them up in my arms, as we do with infants, so maybe that threat keeps them in line. But in all seriousness, I think it's the specialness of the moment, the uniqueness.

I got it at the First Italian Baptist Church of Brooklyn, these 8th-graders get it here, the parents and Godparents of our babies get it. You get it. We get it

Water > cleansing.

Cleansing > new life.

New life > forgiveness.

Forgiveness > Eternal life.

Eternal life > heaven.

Big words. Big ideas.

Some years ago I arrived at our mission work in India just as some drama was unfolding. A young boy and girl in a rural village had fallen in love, wanted to get married. They were Hindus of different castes. The parents of the boy and girl met together with the village elders, and all agreed: both kids should be killed.

They ran away to our mission center, where they were welcomed and loved and protected. We negotiated a deal with the parents and the village elders: if the kids converted to Christianity, they would no longer be Hindu, no longer in violation of caste restrictions, and could get married. So we baptized them and married them. That's new life. That's the promise of baptism. They got it too.

It doesn't matter how much water you use, it doesn't matter how old you are. What matters is that you get it. William Christopher Collison, thank you for helping us to "get it" today!

Let's stand and sing our final hymn today, "I Will Be True," No. 608.

*I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare.*

*I would be friend of all--the foe, the friendless;
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift*