

1st Sunday after the Epiphany, January 10, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 43:1-7, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

If I say the word “baptism,” what image comes into your mind? Do you get a picture? Tell me about it afterward!

I tried this on myself and what immediately came to mind was Holy Trinity Parish Church in Cookham, a beautiful, 10th Century Norman church in a small, rural village not too far from Windsor Castle.

It was there, in the summer of 1974, that my niece, Louise, was “Christened.” That’s a word that was used a lot in this country – what changed it was the Book of Common Prayer 1979.

The word – “Christening” – has power, of course, if properly understood – it means “being made Christ-like.” I guarantee you that not a single person at the baptism (except perhaps me and the priest) would have known that.

And the word – “Christening” – was only used to refer to children – probably because adult baptism was so rare. No one in England when I grew up would ever have referred to what happened when an adult was baptized as “Christening” – and in case you wonder, I have no idea what they would have called it when an adult had water splashed over his or her head in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

On that beautiful day I remember wearing a white, woolen suit, and how the shafts of sunlight played across the huge flagstones that made up the floor of the baptistry.

It was a family event – my brother and sister-in-law (obviously!) My mother, my brother’s brother- and sister-in-law, a few assorted aunts and uncles. Oh, yes, and a priest. That was it. In the C of E baptisms were private affairs – family only. When you’re a state church baptism is for anyone who lives within the geographical boundaries of the parish.

A great day! We then all went out to lunch, and Louise promptly threw up over the waiter!

In my first parish, Christ Church, in West Wimbledon (not the one you see looming in the skyline when they pan up from the Wimbledon tennis courts), I remember that I averaged at least a “Christening” every couple of weeks – usually around 3:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. NEVER (!) Would it be during the service in the morning! Heaven forbid they actually have to come to a service!

In every case, the family was unknown to me – they weren’t active. They were almost always surprised that I wanted to meet with them in their homes before the service to talk about what “christening” was all about.

I suspect if they had known that because the C of E is a State Church they could have demanded “christening” without ever having to meet with me, most of them would have done so – for them

there were elements of folklore, superstition, and magic involved, but almost never any religion! No idea that what they were doing was making a life-long commitment on behalf of their child; no idea that they were also going to be responsible for a bunch of stuff over the next approximately sixteen years involving their child and Christian faith. In fact words like “commitment” were as foreign as if it were all Greek!

I think it has been like that in the Episcopal Church, too. But not so much since 1976 and the Book of Common Prayer introduced that year: New, with the BCP ‘79, was the Great Vigil of Easter; new, was a focus on “baptism” rather than “Christening;” new was the rubric that you could only baptize on a Sunday during the main service of the day, and then on four or occasionally five specific Sundays during the year; new, was the rubric that even if there was not a baptism on those four Sundays, everyone still renewed the promises involved in their own baptism. And, ESPECIALLY NEW was the baptismal covenant itself.

What all this newness did was Change the Episcopal Church. Not as much as some of us had hoped, but that change has taken place. And as the years go by it continues to change us.

Even so, much remains to be done to both understand and embrace the truly radical consequences of taking the Baptismal Covenant seriously – or, I suppose, of taking baptism itself seriously.

As we enter a new year – one where we’ll be spending some considerable time reflecting on the nature of community – this day starts us off with a focus on baptism, acting as a reminder that a community is a gathering of individuals who have each made a personal commitment in the presence of that community through a religious ceremony involving water.

That relationship between community and individual is a symbiotic relationship: you can’t have one without the other!

You – I – can’t be an individual Christian unless you or I are a part of a community of Christians who worship together, share in ministry together, understand their core identity as a common one.

And you and I – we – can’t be a Christian community unless we have made an individual, personal commitment to follow Jesus in the presence of other Christians in a religious ceremony involving water – either the original ceremony or the renewals.

When it comes to being a Christian in community we don’t have the luxury of personal opinion when it comes to the core values of our faith.

When it comes to being an Episcopal Christian in community we don’t have the luxury of personal opinion when it comes to the canonical, institutional structures and rules of our denomination.

And when it comes to us as individual Christians, and Episcopal Christians, we do have the responsibility for making communal decisions, committing to communal enterprises, seeking a

common pilgrim's path, all the while being responsive to framework that Christian Community – and especially Episcopal Community – provides.

In other words, for want of a better phrase, we're all in this together!

As we renew our vows we're doing something very serious, therefore. This is a life-and-death matter.

Join me, as we do this, as we renew our vows.

Join me as we do something afterward in response to those vows – as we commit ourselves to the building-up of this community for the work God gives us to do in this season of our lives and our common life. Amen.