

“Of Water AND the Spirit”
Bishop William W. Hutchinson
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Isaiah 42: 1-9

John 3: 1-15

There she stood in front of me. Her eyes were sparkling, her face was festooned with a brilliant smile, and she was bouncing on the tips of her toes as we spoke and she eagerly let her excitement be known. She was dressed in her finest white dress and was joined by some 200 other eager souls in their snowy white dresses and starched white shirts. They were gathered for the baptism service that was about to take place in the courtyard of one of Havana, Cuba’s largest Methodist churches.

Four years ago a few of us from the United States gathered in Havana with Methodist leaders from The Americas and the Caribbean to celebrate the exploding church in that area of the world. We had gone to this church, pastored by the bishop of Cuba, Bishop Pereira, to participate in a mass baptism. The fact it was allowed to be in the courtyard of the church was a milestone within itself, because the government of Cuba did not want to promote life in Christ in any way. The request had been made to allow the baptisms to be done in a city park so the witness of the faith could be made to more people. But we were happy just to get to do it in the out of doors so others could see this living testimony to the regenerating grace of Jesus Christ. The courtyard was surrounded by hundreds of onlookers from the city streets, and a lively Christian band was perched on the balcony, playing energetic music so all knew something special was about to take place.

A large above-ground pool had been brought in for immersion baptisms, and several stations for those who wished to be sprinkled or who had chosen the baptismal form of pouring were set up as well. When the preacher began to “exhort” the candidates, their eyes began to dance with eagerness. The more the preacher exhorted, the more the people became excited until they were literally jumping and dancing in place, just straining against any restraint from the baptismal waters.

I watched the young, the middle-aged and the elderly prepare themselves. The elderly woman right in front of me literally was ecstatic. She danced and held up her hands and prayed aloud. When the word was given, they all lined up at the various stations to receive baptism. I’ve never seen more enthusiasm! I’ve never heard more ecstasism! I’ve never felt more energized! It was a life changing experience for us all.

As one colleague commented, “This is how the rituals of the church should be observed; open-air so the world can see and experience what the church of Jesus Christ is all about!” Mr. Wesley would undoubtedly say that such visual participation is yet another means of grace by which many are won into the Kingdom! Well, we can’t get our assembly outside for Fort Worth to see and experience what we are doing here, but we can at least make our witness boldly in front of one another.

Under the canopy of nightfall, a man of stature and wealth in Jerusalem made his way to the place where Jesus was staying and sought counsel for his soul. “I know you are from God,” said the man known as Nicodemus, “because you couldn’t do the things you do if God weren’t moving in you.”

Jesus responded, “You are absolutely right. If you are not born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m talking about, which is God’s Kingdom.”

Then ensued that now familiar conversation between Jesus and this Jewish leader about being born again. Nicodemus asks how this being born again, being born from above can happen and Jesus says, “Unless one is born of water and the spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Or, in Eugene Peterson’s expanded imagery, “When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch – the Spirit – and becomes a living spirit.”

In other words, Jesus is saying we have to be born from above – “out of this world, so to speak.” We have to be inhabited by that spirit of the living God, bringing life to our otherwise plodding souls, and lifting us from the ashes of life around us into the splendor of life in the living God.

It’s that blowing of the wind of the spirit of God that sets the hearts to pounding, feet to dancing, eyes to sparkling, and hands to reaching skyward like those beautiful Cuban Christians before one drop of baptismal water was applied! I guess they got the proverbial cart before the horse! I would dare say God had already poured out birth from above on them and they were secondly seeking the waters of baptism as a sign of confirmation for this spiritual blessing of new birth.

But most of the time we go about this in the reverse order. We United Methodists are baptized with water as infants, or even as reluctant teenage confirmands, and it is often years later before we encounter, engage or even entertain the notion that there is more – that there is something which we are missing. We hear about this “something more” in some Bible study, or some Emmaus weekend, or in a revival at our friend’s church, and we, like Nicodemus, start asking the question – “What’s this about a second birth that has to do with the Spirit of God and that will usher me into a vital, living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It ushers me right into the Kingdom of God itself.

“I’ve had the water applied, and I thought that was all. Now you are saying there’s more?” YES, there is MORE! And that MORE is the connecting link to the very heart and spirit of Jesus.

In 1786, John Wesley wrote out of the depths of his heart and his own rebirth these great words of concern:

“I do not fear that the people called Methodist shall ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect

having the form of religion, but not the power thereof, and that undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, discipline and spirit with which they first set out.”

John Wesley, 1786

“Thoughts about Methodism," The Armenian magazine

Let me pose this pointed question to you personally, and to us collectively:

“Have we been baptized into form, but not yet into power? Have we been born from above as well as from below? Have we been baptized with water AND the Spirit? To use two phrases spoken frequently by one our district superintendents in Louisiana, have we moved from the “My, my, my” state of baptism to the “Yes, Indeed! state?”

My maternal grandparents and Kay’s maternal grandparents were members of the Nazarene Church. The Nazarenes grew out of the Methodist Church and were formed around the turn of the last century as a part of the holiness movement. The Methodists were going a little too far afield from the scriptural teachings and from pious living, so the founders of the Nazarenes felt, and they pulled away into their own house. They did strange things, our grandparents. They knelt on their knees for prayer. They didn’t wear make-up or costly apparel. When my mother went back home as an adult and had fingernail polish on, my grandfather quietly observed, “I see you mashed your fingers!” (With me and our sons it was “I see your ear has grown a gold stud.”) Church was a major activity, scripture reading was a daily routine, prayer was the key to heaven, and baptism from above was that “second blessing” all desired.

As the next generation (our parents) became a little more affluent, and more in tune with the world, sophistication took us to the Methodist Church. They weren’t quite so “strange.” A nice quiet family baptism would do and if we talked about the “second blessing” it was in more hushed tones. We didn’t want to be quite as bizarre as our grandparents.

I’ll always remember sitting outside an Oklahoma church on a hot July Sunday waiting for Kay’s grandfather to come out. We had been to The United Methodist Church and had gotten out at the appropriate and respectable hour of 12 noon. But not these Nazarenes! They were still at worship.

We waited and waited. Finally he came. We asked, “What were you doing in there for so long?” “We were praying a man through,” he replied.

“Praying a man through? Well, did you ever?” I hadn’t heard that in a long time. That meant they were all on their knees in prayer for some brother who wanted to know Jesus and accept him into his life but didn’t quite have the conviction of the spirit to do so.

If we had been at the United Methodist Church we would likely have said, “Maybe we can take a moment to apply a little water, but we don’t have time to pray you through! It’s 12 noon you know! And we’re closing up shop for the day. Come to my office this week, and we’ll talk about it and reason it through. Let’s stand for the benediction!”

John was only 10 years old. He had been invited by a friend to attend the Spring Revival at their church. He was excited about going! But I was nervous. So I sat down with our oldest son -- John -- and filled him in on what he might expect. I told him about the singing. I told him about the convicting preaching. Then I told him about the altar call!

“Now, at the end of the service they’ll give an invitation to come forward and repent of your sin and accept Jesus as your savior. No matter how you feel at the time, I don’t want you to move! You and I will talk about it all when you come home. Don’t go forward!”

After all, what was I to do? I was the United Methodist preacher at the church down the street and we have our own way of doing things. I mean I couldn’t have a converted, “saved” 10-year-old on my hands. He might embarrass me. He might have even taken up the practice of the church he was visiting and done something spirited and radical, like say “Amen” in the church service!” Follow Jesus, yes, but with careful attention to decorum and dignity!

Isn’t it amazing how we don’t want Jesus and the Holy Spirit loose among us! They might embarrass us!

I’ll always remember my first Sunday to preach at Central United Methodist Church, my last appointment as a pastor of a local church. I think I made a socio-religious faux pas. I embarrassed myself. At the close of that first sermon I invited people to come down to the front and kneel at the communion rail and pray for the Spirit of God to bless us from above and pour blessings on the beginnings of a new ministry together. I think in the 8:30 service maybe one lone person came to pray while we sang the closing hymn.

Well. I’m a slow learner! I made the same invitation at the second service. Maybe five people braved the walk to the front. And I thought, “Well, Bill, you messed up your very first Sunday. Prayer at the communion rail is not a part of the practice of this church family. Either that or their parents all told them, ‘When the preacher gives the call to come forward, don’t you move!’”

Well, today I am asking you to move! Or maybe I’m asking you to allow yourself to “be moved.” I’m praying that God’s Holy Spirit will move you to the baptismal waters here this morning and by whatever motion you choose to use, you will touch the water and apply it to yourself to renew your baptismal commitment. At the same time, I urge you to utter a silent, or even audible (Heaven help us!) prayer that implores, “Come upon us, Holy Spirit. Baptize me anew, along with our entire assembly gathered here today. Be born again in me this very day and usher me into that birth from above that makes me a totally new or freshly renewed child of God and a fully washed daughter or son of yours.”

It’s an invitation for ALL of us. No one is excluded and no one is unneeded.

Let me issue a little secular invitation that appeared in the Baton Rouge Advocate, and is an advertisement for a, shall I say it aloud, a CASINO in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

“Slot Yankers. Trust Fund Babies. Peanut Vendors. Tortured Artists. Baby Boomers. Gen X’ers. Party People. Pizza Guys. Paper-or-Plastickers. Prime Ministers. Socialites. Hippies. Traditionalists. Burger Flippers. Desk Jockeys. Disc Jockeys. Jockeys. Laptop Luggers. And Anyone Else We May Have Missed,
WELCOME!”

Shall we gather at this river? Come, let’s wade in these waters! Come on down to the river to pray, come on down, come on down! My, my, my! Yes, Indeed! Water AND the Spirit. Water AND the Spirit.

Amen and Amen!