

Back to the Basics Baptism



The Rev. David Evans, pastor at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, is trying to make the church more inviting by offering a "no-strings-attached" baptism service for anyone interested in attending. Evans insists that baptism is the first step in finding Christ, regardless of denomination.

John the Baptist didn't require a catechism class or the promise to join a church before he did his thing. Neither does St. Peter's Episcopal Church. At least this once, anyway.

The church is offering no-questions, no strings baptism on November 6th at 10:00 a.m. Everyone under every circumstance is welcome to be baptized — even if he or she never plans to walk through the door of the 4901 Main Ave. church again. The only qualification is that the person being baptized claims Jesus Christ as savior and wants to be his forever, said the church's pastor, the Rev. David Evans.

Why the no-fuss approach? The whole idea behind baptism is the person's desire to be closer and more committed to God, Evans said. "Probably seen from God's eyes, that's enough."

Baptism had plenty of chances to become complicated in the more than 2,000 years since John the Baptist offered simple, full body immersion in the Jordan River to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. Many mainline Protestant ministers politely dab water on babies' foreheads. Some more evangelical churches want new members from other churches to be re-baptized as adults by full immersion in large tanks built into the church for just that purpose. Some churches baptize only adults so that baptism is the individual believer's choice instead of something decided for them by Grandma as a sort of holy insurance. At St. Peter's, those baptized will lean over the baptismal font. Water will be poured over their foreheads and allowed to fall back into the font.

No matter how or when it's done, though, baptism remains the sacrament that "admits" a person to Christianity with a symbolic washing away of sins -- spiritual purification.

Anyone who is baptized is welcomed as Christ's own, Evans said. "It's not like you have to get clean and get everything in order before God accepts you," he said. "It's the other way around. It's as we are. That's called grace, which liberates us, and it's the grace that makes change."

No, St. Peter's is not trying to drum up business. New members would certainly be welcome, but pews in the church are crowded as it is, with average Sunday worship attendance of about 80.

"We're doing it because we're called to do it," Evans said. "We really want people to grow in Christ. That's the bottom line — no guile, no hypocrisy, no hidden agenda."

HEALING A 'BRUISE'

Evans agrees that some sort of formal preparation for baptism is usually advisable. But he justifies this special baptism for two reasons: Biblical evidence exists that the early church performed on-demand baptisms, and “the church” — meaning any type of formalized religion -- sometimes “bruises” people, he said.

Evans' best example of the church bruising people is his own parents. His mother was Roman Catholic, and his father was raised in the Disciples of Christ denomination. Both attended a Disciples of Christ church while students at Purdue University during the 1930s — that is until the Disciples of Christ minister told Evans' father never to bring a Roman

Catholic into his church again. Neither went back to any church for about 20 years, until someone invited them to a Christmas Eve service, Evans said. “It's terrible to say, but I really feel personally sometimes the church in general judges people,” Evans said. “I'm a pastor’, and I hate to say it, but I have said dumb things. Maybe this baptism service in some small way can change that church bruising a little bit.” But why would anyone who doesn't attend church and doesn't plan to join St. Peter’s want to be baptized in the first place? The answer is both complicated and simple, Evans said.

The complicated answer: The classic theological description of baptism is that it's an outward sign of an inward grace. It's that inward part Evans is interested in.

“I talk to so many people who have a gnawing emptiness inside,” Evans said. “They have a good marriage, a good job, a good house, good 2.1 children and a good retirement account (well, until recently), but they're still hungry and questioning.

“I know what the answer is — faith in Christ. It sounds simplistic and naive, but the truth of the matter is, it's the truth. The reality of life is that lives are changed and fulfilled. It's not phony. Our church would like to be the mid-wife, to see that relationship (bloom) between people and their Lord. There's just no greater joy.”

The simple answer: Baptism is the door through which those who pass find a deeper knowledge of Christ. It establishes and deepens personal faith, Evans said.

Episcopalians believe that Baptism is baptism, regardless of the denomination of the clergy that performs the ceremony. Anyone who has been baptized by another denomination at whatever age does not need to be re-baptized, Evans said.

People already baptized are welcome to reaffirm their baptisms during the Easter service, but the formal service for that reaffirmation of baptism usually takes place before a bishop.

EXTENDING A WELCOME

While the church of St. Peter’s fairly old, as mainline Protestant denominations go — over 200 years old - it’s become a younger church.

When Evans arrived nearly four years ago, the church was a typical older church. “A couple of years ago, we were seeing more families with children come to the church. I announced in church one Sunday that if you wanted to have a quiet church you’d better go to the 8 a.m. service, because from now on, 10 a.m. is for families and young children, and it will be noisy” Evans said. “Not everyone was happy about that change, but last Sunday we had nine children under the age of five in church!”

Sunday attendance is about 85 and there is a breakfast between the 8a.m. and 10a.m. services starting at 9a.m. "We recently returned from a mission trip to Belize, and there are many small groups here. In fact we are a pretty active church." Evans said, and several other organizations use the church.

Services follow the Episcopal "Book of Common Prayer" and include newer and classic hymns.

Evans calls the congregation now "very open, affirming and welcoming." That means, he said, that people who come through the door "don't have to jump up to any standard, be something they're not, or put on a mask. They can be themselves."

And Evans does understand a welcoming church, he said. He points to a harrowing sailing trip with two of his sons in a 22-foot boat during the mid- 1990s. The trio sailed through the kind of storm that makes you kiss the ground once you land safely. The next morning, they were eager to attend church. They went wearing some of the same clothes they had worn during the ordeal.

"No one said hello to me or passed the peace except one man in front of me who was also a stranger," Evans said. "The only time I've ever wanted to be a bishop was right then." Count on a warm welcome at St. Peter's, in other words.

Evans has no idea how many people to expect. "Whoever God sends, that's who's going to come," he said. "We won't have more than God wants us to have or fewer than God is calling."

FAST FACTS

Baptism candidates are asked to call the church.

Anyone interested in being baptized at St. Peter's Episcopal Church during the November 6th, 10a.m. service is advised to call the church in advance so sufficient supplies can be ordered.

Following the custom of the church, each person baptized will be given a small gift to commemorate their baptism. Each will also receive a candle lighted to represent the light of Christ.

Information about basic Christianity and St. Peter's church will also be available. If there's enough time, the church will also mail invitations to the service for each person being baptized.

A talk by Evans and a brief rehearsal will take place before the ceremony. For more information, call the church at (440) 992-8100. The church also has a Web site at www.StPetersAshtabula.org.