

“Full Immersion”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. I don't know how many of you would know the name of Dr. William Culbertson. Dr. Culbertson (before his death) back in the 1970s was president of Moody Bible Institute, in Chicago. As an Episcopalian, he enjoyed telling stories about his Baptist friends; in this case, about three who had been converted and were scheduled to be baptized by immersion in the local Baptist Church. As it turned out, the entire community turned out.

Here's what happened. (Try to picture the scene.) The little church had only one small dressing room (in the front) which opened into the baptistery, (the pool in which) the men were to be immersed. The dressing room was shielded from view only by a (thin white sheet) that hung over the entrance, with a floor covered by linoleum.

On that not-to-be-forgotten Sunday night, the three candidates for baptism were standing in front of the church. The first candidate, after being baptized, had gone behind the sheet to change his clothes. The second was then baptized, and joined his companion in the dressing room. As the third was getting ready for his turn, the second (who had just been baptized) was having difficulty wiggling out of his wet trousers. He pulled one leg out and gave a kick with other. Unfortunately his foot skidded on the wet linoleum, and back into the baptistery he went, landing on top of the third candidate (who had just climbed in), as well as on top of the preacher. If that weren't bad enough (as he went), in an attempt to try to keep from falling in, he reached out and grabbed the sheet shielding the dressing area and carried it with him into the pool.

Meanwhile, the first man had removed all his wet clothes. When the sheet disappeared into the water, it left him standing before the congregation in nothing but his birthday suit. He quickly grabbed a chair and tried to hide behind it. Meanwhile, the lights had been turned low for the baptizing. Somebody yelled, “Turn out the lights!” An excited deacon did exactly the opposite. He turned them on full power. That was a service (I'm sure) no one soon forgot. According to Dr. Culbertson, a true story.

The title for our message today is “Full Immersion.” (Full Immersion.) It comes from the story we read (in Mark's gospel) about Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River by a man named John.

It comes also on the second Sunday in which we're doing a little follow-up on our 40 Days of Prayer. From the Sunday just prior to Thanksgiving up until January 1, we challenged ourselves to be praying every day, (for 40 days), asking for God's guidance in our lives (individually), as well as for his guidance in our shared life as we move (together) into this New Year.

If you were here last week, you remember how we made time during our regular prayer time for each of us to write down (on the insert) in the bulletin a bit about what you prayed and what answers you might have heard. (We had almost a hundred responses last week.) We're going to do the same later (in our worship) today. And then, beginning next week, we're going to be putting (on display) the things you've written and working to see if we can find some common themes that might give us an indication of where God is leading in the year ahead. (I'll say more about that a bit later.)

Now, I don't know what your experience with baptism has been. There a number of ways to be baptized. Here at St. Timothy's and most churches (I know), baptism takes place by simply pouring water on the person's head (three times) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In some churches they do a full immersion, the same words, (being shared), with just a bit more water.

The word “baptize” means “to apply water.” It doesn't matter how much or how little, but to simply apply. When water is applied (in the name of the Triune God) and the words of promise are shared, God is at work. (That's how it works.) God forgives sin. He gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. He makes that person his child. And he promises to give that person eternal life; all in baptism, all through the power of the Spirit. It's a powerful sacrament.

Now, we're talking today about “full immersion,” about being fully immersed. We're also talking about prayer, about seeking God's guidance. As we do, I want us to think today (not so much) about the water and

how much it takes, but about what's happening, who it is that's at work, and what God wants to see happen in us.

"Full Immersion." I don't know how many of you have ever studied a foreign language. Our youngest daughter, Rebecca, was home for the Christmas and New Year's break. She's now back at Biola (in Southern California) taking a January class, just prior to her final semester. The class she's taking is Spanish. It's Spanish III. It's a three-week course. For three solid weeks, six hours each day, homework each night, tests throughout, she's speaking Spanish. That's all she's doing. There isn't time for much else. For three weeks, (for the most part), that's her life. She's living it, breathing it, taking it in, fully immersed in the language.

Now, three weeks isn't enough to learn a language. It's hardly enough to start. But full immersion (for three weeks) is so much better than an hour or two a week for a semester. When you're fully immersed, it sticks. You pick it up. It sinks in and it stays.

It's the same thing in baptism. It's the same thing in the Christian life. I've known many people over the years who have been sprinkled or splashed with a bit of the faith. They were baptized when they were young. Parents brought them to Sunday school. They might even have been confirmed. But then it stopped. Ever since, a service here, a ceremony there; Christmas and Easter, and a time or two in between, and that's it. And they wonder why it doesn't work. They can't figure out why it doesn't all figure out.

Now, I want to be careful here, because I know each of our experiences has been different. What you've gone through in your life is not the same as what's happened in mine. In the same way, where and when you were baptized (and how) is probably not exactly the same as anyone else. What matters, (however), is not the how, but the who; not the when and the where, but the why and the what.

To be sprinkled or splashed (in the Christian faith) is not the same as being immersed. You can't do this "following Jesus" thing part time, if you want it to work. If you're going to follow, you need to follow. If you're going to trust and believe (that it makes a difference), then you need to believe and to trust (that it makes a difference).

I took Spanish for two years in High School; made it through without having learned too much. "Buenos dias!" "Como se llama?" Donde esta el bano?" Two years of study, and that's about all I remember. Two years of playing around with the language, and all I can do is a bit of playing around. Same thing can happen in the Christian faith. Same thing can happen in a person's life.

Our second reading today was from the book of Acts, (chapter nineteen), the story of some believers in Ephesus who had been playing around with the faith. Paul asks them (in that chapter) if they had received the Holy Spirit. They said "They didn't even know there was a Spirit." (Paul then asks), "Then what baptism did you receive?" (They said) "It was John's." (It was John's.)

Now, John (as you know) was the one who baptized Jesus. His role was to prepare the way for Christ. That's what he did. He prepared the way for Jesus. He set the stage for the one who was (soon to take) center stage.

Now, do you remember the difference between the two; between John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus? John's baptism (Mark tells us) was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus' baptism was a baptism of the Spirit for the beginning of a new life.

Let's talk (for a moment) about the difference. They're both important. They each play an essential role. But they're different. The one (without the other) isn't complete. The first without the last leaves something missing that's essential.

Repentance and forgiveness, the Spirit and new life. To repent means literally "to change your mind," change your direction, to start living in ways that are new. (We've talked about this before.) When you repent, you commit yourself to change. When you change, you're not the same as you were before.

Now, for John, (on the one hand), that's what he was doing. It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. There was an urgency in his message. There was no time to waste time. The Messiah was coming. Jesus was soon to appear. It was time to repent and to change.

For Jesus, (on the other hand), when he appeared, it was different. For Jesus, (when he showed up), it wasn't the same. It wasn't just a change (that he came to see), but a new life (he came to give). It wasn't just a matter of doing things differently (than you did in the past), but actually doing (in the present) things you'd never before done.

There's a big difference between the two: repentance and forgiveness, the Spirit and a new life. For John, it was "metanoia," a change of mind. For Jesus, it was metamorphosis, a brand new life.

Now, go back (for a moment) to what we've already said. (It's the same thing.) It's one thing to be sprinkled or splashed in the faith. It's another to be fully immersed. It's one thing to change your mind and to repent. It's another to be led by the Spirit and to give your life to Christ.

You see it all the time, even in the church. How many believers are there who've been baptized, but (for some reason) who've never fully understood what that means? They know their sins are forgiven. They know there's a place for them in the kingdom. They trust that they're children of God (and they really are) - no question.

That's how it works. That's why we baptize. We're not children of God because of what we've done. We're children of God because of what he has done. We're not going to (end up in the kingdom) because of promises we've made to him. There's a place for us in heaven because of promises he's made to us: in baptism, by the Spirit; on the cross, because of Christ.

That's how it works. It's not our works (that get us in) but his. It's not what we do (that qualifies us for anything), but what he has done that qualifies us for everything. That's what happens in baptism, why we do what we do.

But there's more to the Christian life than being baptized. There's more to your walk with Christ than starting your walk with Christ. (And that's the point.) It's one thing to change your mind and starting doing old things new. It's another to allow God to change your heart and to start doing new things.

In the book of Acts, Paul asked the believers if they had received the Holy Spirit. The believers said they didn't even know there was a Spirit. (Something had to change.) You can't live the Christian life without the Spirit. You can't be doing in your life what God wants you to be doing in your life, if you're trying to live it on your own. What you need is the Spirit. What you need is something only God can provide.

It's not a coincidence that the book of Acts is called the Book of Acts. It's the story of what happened after the Spirit showed up. Chapter one, Jesus goes back into heaven and the disciples are told to wait and to pray. (And so they did.) They waited and they prayed. They prayed and they waited. It wasn't theirs to control. As much as they wanted things to change, they didn't have the power to make them change. It wasn't happening. It couldn't happen.

But then it happened. Chapter two, the Spirit shows up and it all blows up. It goes viral. More than three thousand people came to faith on that first day, and that was only the start. By the time the book of Acts is finished, thousands more had come to faith; people had been healed, lives had been changed, Saul becomes Paul, and churches had been started from Jerusalem all the way to Rome, and everywhere in between.

How did it happen? Because of John's baptism of repentance and forgiveness, a change of mind? No, but because Jesus' baptism of the Spirit and the beginning of a new life.

One writer has said that what the church needs today is to move from being caught in the "Book of Numbers" to being fully immersed in the "Book of Acts."

This isn't a numbers game; get as many as you can baptized, so the numbers of the church go up. That's not what this is about. It's not why we're here. We're here because of the Spirit. We're here because of Christ. And what Christ wants to see (in us), what the Spirit is able to bring about, is a brand new way of life.

Before closing today, let me say a few words about our 40 days of prayer, what's going to happen in a few moments, share a little story, and then leave you with a challenge.

Let's start with the prayers. Like we did last week, when it comes to our prayer time, I'll be offering a few prayers, setting the stage for what's to follow, and then giving each of us a chance to write down what's been happening with our prayers.

There's an insert (again this week) with a place for you to write down what you've been praying about (during these 40 days), how God has answered, and what that means for your own life, as well as for our shared life. During our prayer time, we'll be giving you that time.

If you were here last week and you've already written what you want to write, or if you're visiting (here today) and this is all new, then simply use that extra prayer time to be praying about what God might be wanting you to hear. And then, following our prayers, as we receive the offering, there'll be a chance for you to bring forward what you've written and place it in the basket at the altar, symbolic of offering your prayers and your life to God.

Next week, we'll be taking what you've written and putting it on display for others to see and to read. If you don't want others to know what you've written, then don't write your name. If you do, or you don't care, then you can. Either way is fine. (That's what's happening with our prayers.)

Now, here's the story. It's a story from an article in the Chicago Tribune, written by a man named Jim Yardley. It's about a great bridge that spans the Yangtze River in China. The bridge carries, as you can imagine, thousands of pedestrians across it every day. Unfortunately, (like with so many bridges of its kind) a number of people (each year) use the Yangtze River Bridge to bring an end to their lives. More than a thousand people have jumped from this bridge since the time it opened in 1968.

The story was how, in 2003, a man (named Chen) in his mid-30s decided this had to end. Since that time, he has spent every weekend at the bridge, trying to keep people from jumping. So far, according to the article, he has kept 42 people from ending their lives. When asked how he knows who's going to jump, here's what he said. He said, "It's very easy to recognize potential jumpers. Every one of them (he said) walks without spirit."

Walking without Spirit. Playing around with the faith. Being sprinkled and splashed, but never fully immersed. Here's the challenge. Don't go another day trying to live the Christian life on your own. Don't go another moment settling for a change of your mind, when what you really need is a new life. And don't even begin to think that you have what it takes on your own, because you don't. You never will. What you have (on your own) will never be enough.

But what God has and what God gives is. When you were baptized he gave you his Spirit. He promised you his presence. What belongs to him is now fully yours. And what's fully yours because of him (in Jesus) is all you will ever need.

"Full Immersion." It's time to learn the language. Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you for the calling we have in Jesus, for choosing us as your children in baptism, and for the power that is ours in your Spirit. Help us not to settle for a change in what we're already doing, when what we really need is a new life. Work a new life in us, fully immersed, fully equipped, fully transformed to follow Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.