
Luke 24:25-32 & Romans 10:8-13

January 27, 2019

“Believer’s Baptism”

In his novel *“The Hammer of God”*, Swedish Bishop Bo Giertz envisioned a bedside conversation between a woman named Katrina and a dying man named Johannes. Katrina tries to assure Johannes of God’s love for him, but Johannes has a problem – his heart. We’re given no indication a failing heart is why Johannes is dying, only that he has a troubled heart – evidenced by this exchange;

“Johannes...answer me this question: Do you really want your heart to be clean? Yes, Katrina. God knows that I want that...(Then) you must believe this living Word of God: ‘But to him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.’ Up to this day you have believed in works and looked at your own heart. You saw only sin...because God anointed your eyes with the salve of the Spirit to see the truth. Do you have sin in your heart, Johannes? Yes, he answered timidly, much sin, altogether too much.

(Katrina) said only he can see his sin who has the Holy Spirit. Do you mean to say, Katrina, that it could be a work of God, that my heart is so unclean? Not that your heart is unclean — that is the work of sin — but that you now see it, that is the work of God. But why, then, have I not received a clean heart? That you might learn to love Jesus she said, as calmly as before.”

What does the heart have to do with salvation? Evidently something. In Deuteronomy 6:4 Moses told Israel to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength”*. In Luke 24:32 two men who encountered Jesus on the day of his resurrection said; *“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures.”* And in Romans 10:9 Paul issues what some would call the formula for salvation, saying *“if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”* There you are – the heart has quite a lot to do with it.

Giertz’s firm but gracious Katrina understands something then – so does the dying Johannes - our heart must love and trust God. And yet, Katrina and Johannes also understand, as Paul and just about every other Biblical writer did, that the heart is *“full of sin.”* The Bible considers the heart the source of human thoughts and the residence of saving faith.

All this “heart talk” and God’s activity in our hearts inspires churches who, since the 16th century have taught that Christian baptism is appropriate only for those *“who believe in their heart and confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord”* – who by nurture of family and congregation or dramatic moment of conversion have the experience the great Evangelist John Wesley famously described as his *“Aldersgate moment.”*

Listening one evening to a reading of Luther's commentary to the Book of Romans, Wesley said his *"heart was strangely warmed."* In that moment this Oxford educated clergyman moved from intellectual conviction to personal experience – believing truly that Jesus the Son of God had died for him. Why do some churches wait *"until a day of reckoning"* before baptizing? It's a matter of the heart – but also the mind. In reading the very passages we in our Lutheran tradition read, they find that belief can only be described as a personal experience of God's love, and for that to happen, a person must have the intellectual capability of knowing, as the fictional Johannes did, that their hearts are *"oh so full of sin."* Only by receiving the Holy Spirit through faith can a person be cleansed of that sin. This teaching by those in the 16th century that came to be known as "Anabaptists" – or "re-baptizers", folks that Luther could barely stomach by the way, was aided by scientific discoveries in that century about the nature of an individual person.

It was "the age of reason" – and Anabaptists concluded that belief had to be understood in rationalistic and relational terms – a conscious act of both the head and heart. They were convinced that salvation comes only to those who understand why they need to love Jesus - our hearts are full of sin. And because an infant cannot know and cannot express that, they have not yet met the definition of belief, and cannot be baptized.

Modern descendants of the Anabaptists believe that belief is voluntary, because belief involves a conscious commitment to follow Jesus Christ. They believe that baptism is an outward symbol of a change that has taken place within. They fully credit God for that change, but insist we both understand and accept what has taken place in us and commit ourselves to be the person God now intends us to be. Baptism is for them, an act of obedience to Christ.

And they're right – baptism is something God has commanded us to receive. On that our tradition and theirs speak in similar tones. A "day of reckoning" for Christians in Anabaptist traditions is the day they understood what great love Jesus showed them from the cross. For Lutherans the day Jesus died was our "day of reckoning" – the day God decided not to count our sin against us. Read the "about baptism" tabs on websites of churches of the Reformation called Anabaptist, and you'll see words like "experience, repentance, and commitment." Those ought to be on Lutheran websites too. Luther wrote baptism calls for *"daily repentance."* He wrote it should daily awaken a "new self" – in other words "experienced." He wrote the baptized Christian should *"live with God in righteousness"* – that calls for "commitment."

Regarding baptism God's dilemma, if we dare state it that way, is not with children who cannot believe, but with adults who insist on resisting his word of law and doubting his word of promise. Lutherans and our Reformation cousins of the Anabaptist tradition part on the question of whether faith is to be understood in purely relational and not also rational terms. Paul, in I Corinthians 13:12 said we'll never fully know God, not in this life that is. But he goes on to say we sinners are fully known, and God loves us anyway. If good news like that doesn't warm your Lutheran heart, I don't know what will! AMEN