



**Mennonite
Church
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Formation

Sermon

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It's Only Water: The Transformative Power of Worship

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge that the three stories with which I begin my sermon are taken from an article by Irma Fast Dueck found in the Fall 2011 Vision journal available at the Resource Centre.

Imagine a long line of people snaking their way up the river bank. They've left their homes, their cities and towns, some of them coming from a distance. Some families are travelling with kids in tow. Old folks are hanging on to the arms of their grown children. They are women and men of all shapes and sizes, lining up for all sorts of reasons.

For some, the river is the culmination of a journey. Others have given themselves in complete devotion to God. Some are there because someone else dragged them along—and after all, everyone else is doing it. Still others are wondering, struggling, not sure, but hoping the water might somehow change them. Some are half embarrassed, knowing that others are saying, "What is he doing here?" They don't quite know the answer, but still, here they are. And some know the water connects them to their ancestors who crossed the Red Sea long ago and found themselves on a path toward a place of promise. These people want to be on that path, too.

And there is Jesus, walking alongside all these people. And John the Baptist, the guy with no fashion sense, whose breath smells of sweet insects, baptizes them all—Jesus right along with all the others.

But it's just water. The Jordan is an unremarkable river, by all accounts. People who visit it comment on how underwhelming this modest

body of water is. Dirty. A place where people wash clothes and bodies, where they water cattle and sheep. Who knows what all is in that water? It is just water—an ordinary river that becomes the place of an extraordinary act.

It's only water. The potluck is finished; the kids, restless, have gone out to play. The adults can't stop talking about the book they've all been reading for the first time. A book that has captured their imagination so much that George asks Conrad whether he would pour water on him. And then Conrad requests water to be poured on his head. Then Felix, and then others. And the water keeps pouring down. And all the folks gathered in that living room experience new life in that water—though this very act will eventually lead some of them to a watery death, their martyrdom. But it's only water.

It's only water. The service starts a bit late. People are still shuffling in after the call to worship. The sanctuary is packed. Eight people are being baptized today, and another one in a couple of months. A motley group—youth who have grown up in the church; a university student who just wants to be sure; a couple of folks who stumbled into the Mennonite Church, having never experienced church before this year; a mother in her late forties, new to all things Christian, looking for a community of belonging. And there's Emma, a vibrant young woman with Down's syndrome.

Songs are sung, scripture is read, testimonies are shared, prayers are prayed, and the water jug is brought forward. Water is poured generously over the heads of the candidates. Tears form in the eyes of the watching congregation. And Emma, beaming, takes her seat within the congregation,

proudly wearing the white towel wrapped around her shoulders. Now tears are flowing. But it is only water.

Only water, eh? Really? If it's only water, then why is it so important? Why have we bothered with baptism over all these centuries, and why are we bothering with baptism today if it's only water?

At our faith story sharing evening earlier this week we heard from a number of adults who said they expected to feel some sort of mystical or dramatic feeling when the waters of baptism were poured or sprinkled over them. Like the heaven ripping open, a dove descending from heaven, or a voice telling them they were God's beloved child. While that obviously never happened, the significance of the experience of baptism was not diminished.

It might be just ordinary water we use for baptism, and ordinary human actions we do when performing baptism, but we believe that God acts through the water and through our actions. When we participate in baptism, things happen that we do not fully understand. In the ordinary, we catch glimpses of the extraordinary if we are open to God's presence among us.

Through the waters of baptism, so much more is happening than we can fully see or explain or anticipate. Rituals invite us to relinquish control and let go of our need to manage everything that happens in worship. In baptism, we are immersed in the grace, love, and mystery of God. The ordinary water becomes a sign—a sign of God's grace washing over us.

In choosing baptism, we declare publicly that we are Christians. We declare that we are on Jesus' team, and that we're not really willing to just sit on the bench any more: we are ready to play and get in on the action. Rebecca Slough, from AMBS, writes "the rite of baptism marks a key moment in each person's rich and complex experience of saying yes! to God, of claiming God's orientation for her or his life and entering into the [Christian] life of service and blessing."

We have emphasised that here before—baptism is a way to say yes! to God's presence in our life—it is not a simple, one-time choice that means you've arrived at a point where you know it all and have your faith all figured out. Because, as we know, life and faith are a lot more complicated than that. As humans with limited understandings for something as big and mysterious as God we should be constantly discovering and growing in faith and understanding our whole lives long. And it is invaluable to be able to do that as a part of a

community that loves us and welcomes us as we are.

That was another recurring theme that came up at our faith sharing evening. Both the adults and the youth present commented on the power of belonging to a congregation that knows you and cares about you and your life. In our Anabaptist tradition, baptism is not an individualistic act. It isn't just a personal decision with personal implications. In addition to saying yes! to God and receiving grace and forgiveness, baptism also marks our entry in to membership in the church and fuller participation in the life of the congregation. Those of us who have been baptised or have become members here have covenanted with one another to walk together on our journeys of faith.

More and more our nation is becoming a secular society. And so belonging to a group of believers who support one another in this counter-cultural commitment to faith is a powerful thing. It is very difficult to carry on in faith as an individual without a sense of connectedness to others who share our beliefs and with whom we can learn and grow in our faith. The ritual of baptism—for the participant and the observer—offers us a sense of solidarity and unity with one another that transcends our differences and brings us together.

This brings me back to the question of the week—how does worship form or transform us? Or, put another way, How does worship shape us for life? Worship places us in a counter-cultural context. It brings us together with a diverse group of people of all ages to share a common faith. It reminds us of who we are and what we stand for. It declares where our allegiance is. It directs our focus away from ourselves towards something so much larger—the kingdom of God. Worship requires sacrifice and commitment. It convicts us, challenges us, and comforts us. It offers us an opportunity to sing praises to God, and to pray together because we believe that prayer works. It energises and inspires us, and it sends us out into the world, knowing that God is working in our lives and in the world.

It is my hope and expectation that our worship does make a difference. Like baptism, it is not some insular, personal, inward looking thing. It should send us out to live our lives filled with love and the hope that our faith makes a difference in the world.

The water we use today in baptism might be only water. And we might be just a group of people gathered to do a bit of singing and talking together. But not if we believe in the power of God's activity in the world. The Holy Spirit is working and moving among us—infiltrating our world through the waters of baptism and the power of worship

