

Nature's secular sacrament of baptism



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Sometimes you just have to laugh at yourself. I was taking a shower, preparing for a day of hiking in the Smokies, when it hit me: I was taking a shower before hiking in the Smokies!

We tend to think that we get dirty in the outdoors. Outside in the wild places we become unclean, get dirt or sap on our hands, leaves in our hair and mud on our shoes. The earth is too earthy for us. We have to constantly wash it off.

I naturally reflect back on baptism. A purity rite in some traditions. I've performed a few baptisms. Water cleans the body, symbolic of washing the soul, making us acceptable in the sight of the Holy (Clean) One. The word "sanctified" comes to mind, and of course "sacrament." To be holy is to be "set apart" (consecrated). We also hear of the "sanctimonious"—those who "make a show" of their "sanctity."

For centuries the world has been split between the "sacred" and the "profane" ("outside the temple"—profanity not allowed inside). We've been divided up by certain ideologies and theologies absorbed by our minds. We decide to view some things or some people as insiders and some as outsiders. This worldview can bind believers together—while fracturing the human family.

During my "Pentecostal period" we were told by those "anointed" by God that mumbling in a "heavenly language" (angelic "speaking in tongues") proved we were "baptized in the Holy Ghost." Those of us who "got the Spirit" were proud to share the privilege of enjoying "the Full Gospel." We had received God's whole salvation (soul-cleaning), not merely the born again experience (con-



Sin-free Sacrament (Blackwater Falls, W.Va) CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO CITIZEN TIMES

fused? You're not alone). When I saw how this divided our youth group into the "haves" and "have-nots," I began to suspect this new "gift" wasn't so great after all. It didn't feel right to tell our friends their faith wasn't enough, they needed to have this strange "spiritual blessing" to be fully in God's favor. Friendships were lost, and no doubt some faith as well.

Those who manage the sacramental experiences of the multitudes ought to be keenly aware of what they're doing and what they're suggesting by these "holy rites." Communion (Eucharist, Lord's Supper), Baptism, "anointing" and other acts of the inner circle need to be clearly defined. Even among the faithful who practice these sacred acts folks can be confused about what is really happening. For instance, is it to be

taken literally (this "is" the body and blood; this "truly" forgives and purifies you), or is it to be taken symbolically (the meaning is the point)? As we know, this has led to major divisions, even wars, between "true believers."

When I was a student intern in a large church during seminary, the pastor came into my office one afternoon. She was troubled that non-member parents asked her to baptize their child. Following church policy, she turned them away, but it bothered her. In our denomination only church members could have their children baptized, since baptism welcomes children "into the community of faith" (understood to be a specific church fellowship). It's a "universal" sacrament, yet, it's very localized. The "Church Family" often means a particular church family. The unspo-

ken message of the sacrament is: "If we allow the baptism of your child, we expect you to join the church and raise her/him in this church guided by our beliefs." I think it needs to be clearly spelled out what's going on here, what's expected.

Naturalist John Muir was so enthusiastic about his Church of the Mountains, he couldn't help using language from his youthful days in the Church of Scotland. The Bible stories that baptized his young brain stayed with him, giving him endless ways to describe his newfound cathedral in the high country.

Writing to his religious brother David in 1870, John complained of the "hard shells" who try to control sacraments with "coarse-grained dogmatism." He says that baptism can be "a beautiful and impressive ordinance." Admitting he writes with "muddy ink and muddy thoughts," he goes on to assure his faithful brother that he still enjoys the holy rites while far out in the wilderness.

"I was baptized three times this morning." Knowing this would not amuse David, the wise older brother explained: "First, in balmy sunshine that penetrated to my very soul ... Second, in the mysterious rays of beauty that emanate [from plants] ... and Third, in the spray of the lower Yosemite Falls."

As for the dogmatic debates over which form of baptism is acceptable, John completes his playful description thusly,

"My first baptism was by immersion, the second by pouring, and the third by sprinkling."

Muir's soggy sacrament makes more sense to me these days.

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