

Rite of Passage, Part 1

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Today is June 29th and we are right smack dab in the middle of the busiest season for weddings. And because it is a popular time for people to get married there are a lot of anniversaries too. Weddings are big events because they mark a significant rite of passage that is huge in a persons life. Milestone anniversaries too are big events because they commemorate marriage and family survival in an anti-commitment culture. Chances are many here in this room this summer will celebrate or celebrate with someone marking a rite of passage or commemorate a milestone.

Marking rites of passage and the commemorating them is something that begins before we are born. When we are conceived the news goes out and people celebrate, hug, laugh and cry with one another. When we are born it happens again. There are baby dedications, baby showers and visits to the hospital and gifts. And then of course graduations, first paychecks, weddings, first pregnancies, and eventually funerals.

These are all significant passages and moments in a persons life and because they are significant there tends to a real desire to mark and commemorate them with special events. That is why there are high-school reunions, birthdays and wedding anniversary's.

Why do we do all this? Well I am not sure but I know God encourages this sort of thing. When God established his people they marked the passage out of slavery in Egypt and celebrated it annually there after. Their very first harvest in the Promised land was marked and remembered with the annual festival of first fruits. The festival of tabernacles was calendared in so as to not forget that there was a time when they left wilderness wandering and living in tents and passaged into permanent dwelling in the Promise Land. God did not want them to forget these things.

And when God established and instructed the people to mark and remember these significant moments and transitions there were a few essential ingredients involved that attached meaning and significance. And these hold true of births, graduations, weddings and such in our day.

First of all the events were **Community** events. Solo celebrations at times like this just don't cut it. Family and the faith community marked rites of passages together and then commemorated them together as time went on. They didn't do it alone. They came together. Something doesn't feel right about marking the initial passage or remember it later alone.

Graduation and the parties that follow are events where friends and family gather to honor and congratulate; pat on the back and encourage. Who wants to walk across the stage with no audience. Who wants to make and eat a birthday cake alone? When you hit 50 years of marriage and people gather to honor that dedication and commitment it is the assembling of people and the words they share that add meaning to it and say to the next generation who

comes along, now that's an achievement. Events held in honor of a rite of passage are made significant by the recognition we give to it by gathering together for it.

A second ingredient that attaches meaning and significance is **Reflection** – At most events like this someone helps the guests focus on the significance of the event through a prayer, a speech or a toast. Stories are told and laughs are shared.

The OT festivals and rituals called to attention God's past intervention and the fulfillment of his promises. This reflection gave them hope for the future and reminded them that their life is one journey made up of a sequence of significant passages that define the big picture of your life.

At weddings people in the pews reflect on the day they made their vows. ON birthdays Angi and I tend to break out old videos of when that child was born. We talk to them about how happy of an event that was for us. At graduations students give speeches that almost always have an element of recalling important memories of the past that the class of graduates shared together. Reflection is real important. God wants us to remember important moments and events that shaped and formed who we are and give us a faith filled outlook in the future.

The third ingredient is **celebration**. Rites of passage events are events where gifts are shared, music is played, dances are danced. Feast tables are devoured. Rooms are decorated. This too is true of both divinely appointed events as well as the human appointed events.

Community, reflection, and celebrating are all important ingredients involved in marking and commemorating important rites of passage.

I say all of that because there is one rite of passage which Christ has asked his followers to mark for every Christ-follower as they pass through it and then commemorate it often thereafter. They are to be gatherings of the faith community that are celebrations and times of reflection that overflow into teaching opportunities to our children and gratefulness for each of us. The rite of passage is conversion, the moment when a human being passes from death to life; from slavery to sin to freedom from guilt; from condemned to pardoned. And Christ commanded us to mark this passage by an event called baptism and commemorate it by the ordinance of the Lord's supper.

The next two weeks we're going to do a refresher course on these two areas that were to hold a very high-degree of importance among Christ's faith community.

This week we're going to talk about Baptism.

Background: In the scriptures Baptism is practiced first by John the Baptist and then by Jesus Christ. And the two individuals were both considered Rabbi's. Now typically the more disciples a rabbi had the more significant he was considered to be. Every rabbi had his own yoke of teaching and interpretation of the Law and such. In any case the point I want to make is

that John and Jesus used something called baptism as the marker of become a follower in their discipleship community.

If you became a disciple of John you got baptized by John's baptism. And the same was true for those who became disciples of Jesus. But these two were not in anyway opponents or contradictory in their teaching. John was called the forerunner of the Messiah. He was the plow that stirred things up and prepared the way for Jesus. But to make sure it was clear that Jesus approved of John's teaching he was baptized by John.

And that is the first thing I want you to notice: **Christ Accepted the Mark of Baptism Himself.**

Matthew 3:13-17 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (NIV)

Now what is happening here? For Jesus to be baptized by this Rabbi what does this mean? Jesus is acknowledging and identifying himself with this renegade Rabbi. To accept this mark is to say I accept this man, his ministry, his teaching as from God. .

John the Baptist was not in favor with the local Roman officials. He was not in favor with the Jewish Religious leaders. He had spoke out against Herod for immorality and the Jewish religious leaders for hypocrisy calling them and their groupies a pit of snakes. Broods of deceit and hypocrisy. And Jesus, the son of God, accepts his baptism. To be baptized by John is to say, "Let it be known to all that I am one of them. I am not ashamed."

This was an incredible event Here comes the son of God wading down into the water willing to be associated with and identified with this out of favor soon to be beheaded Rabbi and his teaching. And then God in heaven demonstrates his approval of the whole ordeal visibly and audibly. It was an incredible moment that had Heaven's approval written all over it. Jesus was there. The holy spirit was there. And the Father was there.

Christ Marked his Followers with Baptism.

John 3:22 *After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. (NIV)* So those who were joining his movement were identifying themselves with Him through baptism.

(Humorous note) John 3:26 *(John's disciples) came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan--the one you testified about--well, he is*

baptizing, and everyone is going to him." (NIV) in fact (John 4:1) Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, (NIV)

So it was that as Jesus went from town to town and place to place, he taught, performed miracles to authenticate his identity as the Messiah and called people to become his followers and then to be baptized to publicly mark their association with him and with the rest of the Christ-following community.

Well the time came for his earthly ministry to be through and that is when his disciples were given what we know as the Great commission. Herein lies the third thing I want you to notice

Christ Commands the mark of Baptism upon us

Matthew 28:19-20 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (NIV)*

These are the marching orders of the church my friend. They always will be. So it was from that point forward that the church was to mark the passage of people into the Christ-following community. And by taking this mark they were identifying themselves with Christ. And for some it has been done at a great price. Identifying with Christ was not a popular decision in Jesus day and in many cultures and environments even today it is not well received.

Many of you in this very room have been criticized and scorned by people because of your stance for Christ. You've suffered little in comparison to many throughout the centuries but still today there is a snarling of the lip when an adult professes faith in Christ and publicly proclaims that turning point in their life through public baptism.

Conversion and entrance into Christ's faith community is a defining moment in a person's life and Jesus says mark that passage.

For the church it is a time to mark the conversion passage of people into the discipleship community and welcome them with open arms. It serves us with a reminder that God is still saving people today through our ministry efforts. It is a time for us to reflect and look back with joy and grateful hearts our own passage.

For the one being baptized it is a line in the sand test. It is a stake in ground marker that says "Do you really mean it?" To go public without shame or fear before a watching world and identify yourself with the Messiah and His faith community is a step which separates tire kickers from buyers.

The call to public baptism is one of those things that says, "Will you be identified publicly with this man and the others who follow him. Will you step out of the shadows and be named

among his followers. It ups the ante and makes you do a gut check. Once you go public your out of the closet and people know.

Jesus was baptized to establish the mark for those who embrace the salvation he offered and the lifestyle he taught. His disciples were baptized clearly identifying themselves with him and he commanded all who become disciples through them to be baptized as well.

(Slideshow and music) We going to put up a collage of pictures of people who have been baptized in recent years and I want you to just imagine what the father is doing as these people publicly identify themselves with his son. Remember how he showed up and approved his own son's baptism.

So what about you. Some of you have come to faith in Christ in the last several months. We the church are commanded to mark the importance of that passage by baptizing you. Some of you perhaps made this passage a long time ago but have never marked it. I am calling you to step forward and publicly receive this mark and allow us to celebrate your belated obedience. You may feel a little awkward about it because you have been a Christian for quite some time. It's time my friend.

It is at this point that questions arise. What if and what about questions. So I'm going to take a few moments and address the most common questions that come up about this and answer them as best I can.

Question 1: Does infant baptism satisfy this discipleship requirement?

While very bright people are on both sides of this issue it is the position of the church to understand baptism as an indication of repentance of sin and belief in Christ; of passage from death to life.

Only those who are mature enough in their understanding to recognize their sinfulness before God and the substitutionary death of Christ on the Cross can then trust Christ as the provider of salvation and willingly identify themselves with Christ.

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. **Mark 16:16 (NIV)** (Additional verses) Acts 2:38, Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12

So even if you were baptized as a baby as most of you were our practice and belief is that baptism is a public proclamation of having passed from death to life through faith in Christ and his removal of your sin.

Question #2 Does Baptism Save People

Ephes. 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. **(NIV)**

Baptism has absolutely no redemptive powers of its own. Jesus saves people from their sin not baptism. There are those who believe they are Christ-followers because they were baptized.

If you are a person who is trusting your baptism for your salvation but have never come to the place in your life where you have bowed your knee to Jesus Christ; admitted the hopelessness of loosing the shackles of sin on your own; and humbly sought his forgiveness through the cross it's like wearing a ring without having gone to the altar. You are saying something has transpired that truly has not yet occurred.

This is the utmost dangerous position in which to be. Thinking you are in Christ because of something you have done. If your banking on a baptism alone for your salvation and hope for heaven you are in for a rude awakening. You must repent of your sin and life apart from God and trust what Christ did to pay for that sin on the cross. Then you may associate yourself with Him through baptism

Question #3 Is baptism required for salvation

This has to do with a person dying after receiving Christ but never being baptized. Consider the Thief on the Cross who prayed in his dying breath, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." [Luke 23:42-43 \(NIV\)](#)

(Max Lucado) Here is a man who was the first to accept the invitation of the crucified Christ who has no creed, confirmation, christening, or catechism. He never went to church, never gave an offering, never was baptized, and said only one prayer. But that prayer was enough. That thief reminds us that it is only Jesus who saves us in response to our feeble prayer of acknowledging our need for and belief in Him.

Since then many have given their life to Christ on their death bed without opportunity to make that public statement through baptism.

Question #4 If baptism isn't needed for salvation do I have to be baptized?

This question is one that I have always had great difficulty with. I guess is just never has occurred to me as a legitimate question. It's like saying I'm just in this for the benefits. I'm not interested in people really knowing I am one of his or I don't really feel a need to mark this passage. Or maybe your concerned about insulting family.

I guess my response is this. Jesus Christ left heaven to come here only to be rejected, maligned, falsely accused, mocked and beat then crucified on a brutal cross all because you were not capable of living a sinless life. He credited his righteousness to you and took the punishment for you sin. He switch places with you saving you from a life of purposlessness

and emptiness and an eternity in Hell. Whatever the reason may be for wanting to forego this I can hardly deem it legitimate.

If your resisting this I want to call you to do a real check of the soul. Are you afraid of something? Is there a rebellious spirit within you. **Luke 6:36** is a verse I would call your attention to. "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I say?"

If you are someone who is asking this question here is a picture I want you to see.

Acts 8:35-38 *And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him. (NASB)*

I guess it just seems to me that the appropriate response would be something like this guy. I want to do it as soon as possible. "Because of what you have done for me I will do anything you ask. You just say the word. Just say the word. You want me to be baptized, I'll be baptized. You want it to be public. Done, the more people the better. You want be to bear witness of what you have done in my life, I'd like nothing better.

Note these words of the apostle Paul. **Rom 1:16** *For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."*

Note these words of Christ. **Mark 8:38** *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (NIV)*

(Bill Hybles) The true spirit of genuine Christianity is the spirit of a person that is more like this: I will stand anywhere before any number of people to declare how blessed I am and how great a salvation I have and what he has done for me. I can't do anything else but share this even if it means my family may misunderstand me; even if it means the people at work may scoff at me; even if it means looking silly because when my hair is wet people can tell I really don't have as much hair as people think.

If your hung up on this you need to do an internal check and ask the question why not? And then ask the question is any reason truly sufficient in light of what Christ has done for you. Christ followers not only offer their sins to the cross of Christ they yield their wills to Christ. If one won't obey Christ in baptism, what will he do when Christ calls him to obey him in the more costly of the discipleship requirements?

Conclusion: So I want to ask you. Have you ever taken this step of public proclamation. Since the time when heaven reached down and plucked you up off the path to destruction, have you

gone public with that. Have you gone public for the one who subjected himself to public disgrace for you? If not it is time you do and we're going to give you the opportunity and celebrate it with you as a church. In a moment I'm going to talk about our upcoming baptism service.

But for a minute let me speak directly to the hearts of those of us who have long since been baptized and you maybe thinking this message has nothing to do with you. Baptism is a church ordinance. It is an ordinance that is for the whole church. When we mark the passage of people from death to life it is a community event. It is not something you should miss. We publicize these dates well in advance. I know this. Wild horses couldn't keep me away from this. Whether we are baptizing 2 or 20 people, it is so important that we make this the highlight of our church year.

We gather and witness and celebrate with people their public profession and we are reminded that all we do all year long is worth it and our presence says to them way to go. If you are being baptized you can invite people who you know and love to come in support of you and see this beautiful moment of Christian community.

All the serving, working, praying, loving, greeting, teaching and so forth is all worth it because it eventually bears fruit in the form of souls passing from death to life.

If you have need to be baptized you just need to let us know. Otherwise we ask you to join those who do. Make this a priority not because I say so but because God indicates to us that marking the life change of conversion through baptism is incredibly vital to who we are.