

“Growing in Christ - Creating the Beloved Community”

I John 3:1-7 Luke 24:36b-48

Scott B. Martin - April 26, 2009

I have been looking forward to this day, probably not as much as Nicolle and Michelle, but looking forward to the day we would celebrate Ava Perry-Clark's baptism. Baptisms are wonderful days. What's not to like? You have cute kids all dressed up, adoring adults lovingly looking on, all celebrating the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. What could be better? By all means let us savor the moment, let us savor this day; but while we are savoring it, let us remember that baptism is a beginning, not an end. As Christians we trust that there is more to come. In the words of First John **“Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in Christ purify themselves, just as he is pure.”** (I John 3:2-3)

The main symbol of baptism is water. Through the water of baptism sins are washed away, we are purified. This does not mean that we will never sin again, will and we do; but it shows us the way. We are assured that God has loved us since we were born and God will love us throughout our lives and in the life to come. We are assured that God can and will forgive our sins. All we have to do is open ourselves to receiving God's forgiveness. A new and better life is offered to all. Baptism is meant to open our lives to a “purifying process” of growing in Christ.

I John addresses the question of why early Christians were persecuted and why not everyone accepted the message of Christ. I John says **“The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Christ.”**

(I John 3:1b) The argument is that the world could not recognize the value of the Christian faith because it couldn't recognize the value of Christ. Perhaps so, but sometimes the problem is that Christians themselves don't recognize Christ!

Remember when 850,000 Rwandians were killed by their fellow citizens fifteen years ago? 90% of Rwanda was Christian. Theologian and Christian ethicist David Gushee says, “And yet all of that Christianity did not prevent genocide, a genocide which church officials did little to resist, in which a large number of Christians participated, and in which, according to African Rights, ‘more people died in churches and parishes than anywhere else.’” (The Christian Century, April 20, 2004, p. 28)

This is not an isolated case. The same thing could be said of the Nazi Holocaust. Germany was a Christian country and yet Christians were complicit in the holocaust. Christians were also complicit in apartheid in South Africa. Slave holders in the American South used Christianity to support the owning of slaves. During the crusades in the twelfth century Christian soldiers marched under the banner of Christ's cross and killed not only thousands of Muslims in the Holy Land but also thousands of Jews across Europe on their way there and in some cases even their fellow Christians. All of this undeniable history has provided fodder for atheists right down to the present time and understandably so.

David Gushee reaches the following conclusion, “The presence of churches in a country guarantees nothing. The self-identification of people with the Christian faith guarantees nothing. All of the clerical garb and regalia, all of the structures of religious accountability, all of the Christian vocabulary and books, all of the schools and seminaries and parish houses and Bible studies, all of the religious titles and educational degrees – they guarantee nothing.” Given the history we all know is true we cannot deny Gushee’s conclusion.

All of these Christians through the centuries that were complicit in these great sins were baptized Christians. Baptized or not, one has to wonder how well they really knew Christ. Baptized or not one has to wonder how much they had grown in Christ. The issue is not whether they were baptized as babies or as adults. The issue is how far they had grown into Christ. I John says, **“No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.”** (I John 3:7)

The world today, as in every day, needs people of faith, seeking God’s will for their lives. The world needs more people seeking to grow into Christ. I John calls the Christians in the church he was speaking to “little children”, children of God. One of the things we know about children is they have a tendency to grow. They grow physically, intellectually and one hopes spiritually. The world today, as in every day, needs mature Christians.

It may sound like heresy to some, but the be all and end all of the Christian faith is not to get people into heaven. If that was the case we would have a baptism, immediately followed by a funeral! The goal is for us to become more Christ like. This process begins in this

world and continues in the next. Seeking to become more Christ like in this world is an important and inescapable part of the process.

I recently receive that latest edition of the Fuller Center for Housing newsletter. It contained the very last message from Millard Fuller who died a few months ago. I had the privilege of meeting Millard several times and hearing him speak and see him in action. He was a true man of God. He had a passion for loving God and loving neighbor. He turned his back on a successful business and law practice to found Habitat for Humanity, which has built over one million homes for low income people worldwide! For recently, when he was in his 70's he founded the Fuller Center for Housing, which also seeks to provide decent homes for God's people in need.

The night before he died he woke up because of some discomfort. Since he was awake he answered some letters and wrote his column for the spring newsletter. This would be among his last words. He begins with a scripture that he certainly sought to live out on a daily basis, **“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all things will be added to you.”** (Matthew 6:33)

He spoke about how important it was that the office staff at the Fuller Center for Housing begins each workday with morning devotions. Everyone on the staff takes turns leading devotions. There are prayer joys and concerns, scripture and a message. There is also a time for listening to **“hear from heaven.”**

In his early years Millard had a spiritual mentor named Clarence Jordan. Clarence helped Millard to grow in the Lord and to discern God's will for his life. Shortly before he died Millard reflected on one of the very important lessons he learned from Clarence Jordan. “My

spiritual mentor was Clarence. Clarence said that God has His plans for the earth and He wants us, His people, to carry them out. To know God's plans we must seek Him and do so on a regular basis. Too many people, Clarence taught, go off on their own, making their own plans and then asking God to bless them. That is getting it backward! We must seek to know God's plan and become a part of that."

May we all continue to grow into Christ. May we do our part to help create the beloved community here on earth. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Amen.