

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/14/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, February 15 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, continue to pray for peace for the people of the Ukraine. Ask God to bring about a de-escalation of tensions on the border between the Ukraine and Russia. Pray that the Holy Spirit might inspire the international community to advocate for and to play a productive role helping to maintain calm and bring peace to this region.*

Recently, a Roman Catholic priest in Phoenix, Arizona was forced to resign and to apologize after thousands of his baptisms have been declared invalid by the Roman Catholic Church. The reason for this decision is because it was determined that his words during the Rite of Holy Baptism were incorrect. It was found that he had been using what was considered an “invalid baptismal formula,” when he would say, “We baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Now, as you read that line, you may be wondering what is incorrect about his words in baptism. It may sound exactly like you remember having heard it during baptisms in which you have been present. So, what’s the problem. The reason given is that he was using the word “We” instead of “I” when applying the water in baptism. The bishop who responded to the situation wrote, “The issue with using, ‘We’ is that it is not the community that baptizes a person. Rather, it is Christ, and Him alone, who presides at all of the sacraments, and so it is Christ Jesus who baptizes.”

In our baptismal rite in the Lutheran Church, we also use the word “I” rather than “We.” But would it invalidate a Lutheran Baptism if the other word was used? Here are some thoughts. First, when Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28, He told His disciples, including us down to today, to “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 teach them all that I have commanded.” That instruction was given to all of His disciples and couldn’t it be understood to be a corporate command? It is we, the Church, who following Jesus’ direction, make disciples in the name of the triune God. It is an effort in which we all are to engage. That doesn’t mean that we run around baptizing willy-nilly. We do it in the community in which the baptized individual will grow in the faith. But, as we also make the commitment as a community to help the individual develop as a Christian, we are part of that covenant commitment made in baptism.

Second, while it is God in Christ Jesus who baptizes the person, does it matter who does the baptizing. I have known nurses who have baptized infants who do not appear to be able to survive following birth. I know pastors who allow a parent to apply the water at baptism. While we generally have the pastor be the one performing the rite, in part to ensure that it is done properly, it is still God doing the baptizing through water and the word by Jesus’ command—no matter who is applying the water. Jesus gave the formula, that we are to baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but nowhere does it say who is allowed or not allowed to do the baptizing other than, that He sends His followers to make disciples.

It is not my intention nor my place to question the practices of the Roman Catholic denomination. Yet, we who are Lutherans try to keep the focus on what God does and not what we do. We may be the instruments through which the water is applied and the words are said, but it is God who baptizes. The guidance given by the Roman Catholic bishop in the above situation, while it does not specifically say this, does imply that it is the priest who takes the role of Jesus Christ in baptism, as well as other sacraments. I do not want to limit God by saying that only specific people can perform the rite, because Jesus does not say so, any more than I want to limit how God can accomplish what is done in baptism because of the amount of water used. It is God who baptizes through our actions, so long as we recognize and declare that it is done in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey