

“The Baptism of the Spirit”

A professor of constitutional law was recently charged with writing a new constitution for a new government. He was shocked to learn that the average life span of constitutions is much shorter than one might think. In his research, he estimated national constitutions have endured an average of 17 years. The U.S. constitution, 231 years old, is a startling exception to this rule. One must ask what are the conditions which enable a constitution to endure?

One might respond that it is because the constitution is such a well-written document that it has survived the test of time. Although the U.S. Constitution is considered by political scientists to be the greatest political compact ever created, James Madison’s work alone is not the answer to why it still governs us. Other nations’ constitutions have been modeled on that of the United States, but they have failed. Why has ours stayed the course? What is it that keeps us together despite our differences and the continual bringing of new cultures and ideas into our country?

In looking at this question, pastor Joyce Shin of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church writes that as a lifelong student of theology and culture, she has found herself wondering about the conditions that symbols and stories create. She points out that sometimes the symbols and stories that make up our collective psyche are

so much a part of who we are and what surrounds us that we don't notice them until we are jarred by a major upset, such as political divisions, threats of terrorism, or a clash of civilizations or cultures. These symbols and stories are a major reason why we hold together in times of crisis.

The same question about why the U.S. Constitution endures may also be asked about what keeps the Christian church together. Despite differences that have resulted in numerous denominations and theological disputes over the centuries, the church has existed for two thousand years. What has kept the church together?

In our passage today from the Old Testament we read the prophet Isaiah as he writes to the ancient Israelites when they were defeated by foreign powers, sent into exile, and then liberated and brought home. In the wake of their devastation and displacement, even the good news of their liberation to return home must have left them shaken. It was during this period in which ancient Israel was in dire need of reconstitution, that Isaiah reminded them who they were by claiming whose they were. "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel....I have called you by name, you are mine."

That who we are is constituted by whose we are is a profound truth. We are constituted by others' claims on us. Our spouses and our children place claims on

us. Our parents too placed claims on us. All these familial relationships make us who we are. The prophet also reminded Israel that we are also constituted by God's claim on us. Our identity is inseparable from our relationship to and responsibility toward God.

Baptism is the church's age-old ritual that symbolizes God's claim on us. As a symbol of faith, baptism has shaped the collective psyche of the church. The church has not been immune to the all too human tendencies to draw its identity along familial and tribal lines. What baptism does, though, is bring all into the Christian family whom God claims to be his own. In our passage today from Acts 8, we have the symbol and ritual of baptism and one of the age old stories of Philip's mission to the Samaritans. In it we learn that baptism does not draw a circle around the Christian family and limit those in the Christian body. Instead it makes the message of Christ available to all who will accept it.

There was considerable dislike between Samaritans and Judean Jews in the first century. Samaritans were widely viewed by traditional Jews as racially impure and politically treacherous. Even though they worshipped the same God and followed a version of the Torah, Samaritans were outcasts within the household of Israel because the location of their temple was on a different mountain and in a different holy place.

In the Samaritan and Judean mission of Philip long-standing religious

barriers begin to crumble. We read that the Samaritans believed Philip's proclamation about the kingdom of God and the good news of Jesus Christ. We read that both men and women were baptized, the religious observance which bound the people together.

The stories also provided the framework for Philip's work. In John 4 Jesus had gone through Samaria where he met the woman at the well. This meeting was no accident but was part of God's redemptive plan. That Jesus would talk to the woman offends traditional religious beliefs that had long divided observant Jews from Samaritans. That Jesus did this shows the purpose of the Christian faith is to build community and overcome differences.

Most Samaritans were dedicated messianists, and Jesus' confession that "I am" the Messiah in John 4:26 discloses his true identity as the "Savior of the World" to the outcast Samaritans and provided the framework for Philip's distinctive proclamation of the Messiah to the Samaritans. Also critical was the woman at the well herself, who went out and testifies to Jesus. Her personal testimony about Jesus leads others into a shared experience with him. What she did provides the basis for Philip's later missionary work.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. Their house call is an exercise of their spiritual authority. Their laying on of hands brings with it the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Luke does not explain the delay between the two baptisms, but it was necessary to have the second one because the first one was only in the name of the Lord Jesus (In our baptism liturgy of today, we baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and ask that the Holy Spirit work within the person baptized. There is only one baptism). We can only infer from Jesus' promise of Spirit baptism that believers are able to participate fully in the community's missionary vocation when they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What relevance does the Samaritan story have to us today? The aim of the apostles' mission in Samaria is to form a religious community that shares all things in equal measures including their missionary vocation. With the laying on of hands, Peter and John distribute the Holy Spirit among believers in need of its spiritual powers. By doing this, gifts are distributed to the believers so they can do the work of God. In like manner, when you are empowered by the Holy Spirit, you too receive gifts which give you the ability to do the work of God. The diversity of gifts is important to the working of the Christian body.

We also realize from this story that through baptism those of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures come together in the mission of the Christian church. Our tribal and doctrinal differences are set aside. When we say the words that accompany baptism, we acknowledge what God has constituted: who we are is constituted by whose we are. We belong to God. In baptism, we are sealed by the claims that God the Creator and God's beloved creation places upon us.

That we are constituted by our relationships and responsibilities-our loyalties-is what makes us a community of faith. The complex question of what conditions enable a constitution to endure must receive a complex answer. Pastor Joyce Shin's conclusion as to the endurance of the church is that cohesive and enduring Christian communities require prophetic, not tribal, symbols to shape their collective psyches. Our prophetic message today from the prophet Isaiah is that we belong to God and he constitutes who we are.