

Baptism: Solo Sailing?  
A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church,  
Edmonton, Alberta  
by Carol Penner  
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Text: I Corinthians 12:4-13

Today is Baptism Sunday. We have two individuals who have made a choice to get baptized, they are making a public commitment to Jesus. Getting baptized is an individual decision, no one else can make that decision for you. Today I want to focus my sermon on the fact that while getting baptized is a solo decision, being baptized is not a solo endeavor. People do not baptize themselves. They are baptized by a community, and it is in the community that they learn what it means to be baptized.

The writer of the Bible passage we read today was the apostle Paul. He became a Christian in a dramatic way, he was on a trip, going about his business, travelling on the road to Damascus, when suddenly Jesus appeared before him. This was a dramatic revelation for Paul, and he realized that he must follow Jesus. He made an individual decision to follow Jesus, and he asked to be baptized. Paul was filled with the Spirit of God, and the wind of the Spirit blew him from place to place, from Antioch to Philippi, Corinth, Jerusalem, Malta, Rome. When you make an exhaustive list of all the places Paul visited and all the churches he started, he seems like a one-man spirit-filled dynamo. The solo, self-made missionary.

But when you look more closely at the writings of the New Testament, you get a different picture. Many letters that Paul wrote are in our New Testament. He was travelling a lot, but he was very connected to other Christians. In the letter to the church at Corinth, which we call 1 Corinthians and which we read from today, he talks about working with Barnabas and Timothy and Apollos, he has visits from Stephanus and Fortunatus and Achaicus. He sends greeting from Prisca and Aquilla. Paul is not alone, he is in community. And his letters to all the churches are a way of fostering that community even across the miles.

The text we read today says that we are all baptized into one body. There are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit. Paul writes, in chapter 2 of the letter, "We have received the Spirit of God." He doesn't say "I have received the Spirit," he says "we have received it together." "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." And then he goes on to list the different things that the Spirit gives...wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miracles, prophesy, speaking in tongues, discernment of these tongues. All these things are necessary for the church, for the one body, and the Spirit chooses who will get which gift.

It's the opposite of an individual approach. The person being baptized is not given a certificate saying, "Now you have everything you need to be a successful Christian. Go and have a good life, serve the Lord. See you in heaven!" No! The baptized believer is told right off the bat that they don't have what they need. The Spirit does not give you everything you need. You will get what you need from the community around you. Paul says, "We have received the Spirit of God."

And this is Paul talking...Paul the man who sails from place to place starting churches. Even Paul does not see himself as self-sufficient.

And yet, too often we seem to think of ourselves as self-sufficient. We think, we can do it on our own. I know that because I have baptized enough people, who eventually stop going to church. And I have met them since then, and I know they haven't given up their faith. They still believe in God, they still believe in their vows. They just figure they are doing it on their own, without the help of the church. They don't need the church.

Maybe it's part of our culture, the attitude that we can do something alone. Our culture celebrates anyone who does something big alone. It's like we get more credit if we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. If our accomplishments rest solely on our own shoulders.

I was reading this week about the first person to sail around the world solo. His name was Joshua Slocum, he was from Nova Scotia. In 1895 he set out in a 36 foot sailboat. Could he make it around the world by himself, using just the wind? He did in fact sail all the way around the world alone in his little sailboat. You can read the book he wrote about this experience. It has the imaginative title, "Sailing Alone Around the World". It took him over three years, and he travelled 74,000 kilometres, but he did it. Along the way he faced storms and tempests, he was becalmed for weeks in the Sargasso Sea. He was cast ashore on beaches, he had food-poisoning in the middle of the Atlantic, he went through snowstorms and tornados and pirates tried to steal his boat twice, but he did it! One man around the world with just the wind powering him. What a solo accomplishment!

But Joshua Slocum did not achieve this solo journey alone. There may not have been anyone present on his boat, but his success was totally wrapped up with many other people.

When he built the boat in the first place, old sea captains came and gave him advice on how to lay the keel. They knew he was sailing to the Antarctic, and they taught him how to reinforce the boat to help it withstand the ice. When he was sailing through icebergs, he was thankful for the help of the sea captains.

And Joshua had maps. If Joshua had just wanted to sail within shore, places he could see, places he knew, he might have gotten away without maps. But he wanted to sail around the world, and so he relied on the work and wisdom of thousands and tens of thousands of sailors who had gone before him, charting coastlines, taking depth soundings. Sailors who had lost ships on hidden reefs, sailors who had fought terrible currents, sailors who been misguided by similar looking mountains. All these people helped him find his way.

Joshua also relied on brilliant minds who had figured out latitude and longitude, astronomers who created lunar tables, inventors who made sextants and clocks, so that wherever Joshua was in the world, he could figure out where he was.

And Joshua was entirely reliant on the community he found in the hundreds of ports he visited, a community that fostered hospitality of strangers. They helped him repair his boat and get provisions. Without them he would have been stranded or starved.

Joshua Slocum sailed around the earth using the power of the wind, but he was also using the power of many other people. His journey around the earth, his

solo circumnavigation was made possible by the gifts of hundreds and thousands of people, all combined together.

The Apostle Paul was the same way. He made all his journeys around the earth filled with the Spirit. But it wasn't a solo accomplishment. Who taught Paul about the Jewish tradition? Who was there when he had his revelation to teach him about Jesus? Who baptized him? Who travelled with him? Who counseled him, who gave him hospitality, who financed his journeys? Paul was an apostle, a missionary of the church, but he was totally reliant on the gifts that the Spirit gave the church.

In this world we desperately need all the gifts that the Spirit gives, because it is hard to be a Christian. Being a Christian is not a walk in the park. There are many forces that are out there trying to stop you from following Jesus. Jesus himself struggled with these forces, he was tempted, he took the power of the tempter seriously. There are powers and principalities ranged against us, forces in our own hearts, and forces outside of us. It's hard to find our way. Like Joshua Slocum who faced contrary winds, storms that wanted to sink him, and pirates that wanted to take his boat, we must not underestimate the obstacles that we will face as Christians.

Sometimes it's little things. I remember coming out of the grocery store once. I was in the parking lot and I looking at my receipt, I realized that she had not included the big bag of flour under the cart. Now I would like to say that I have the moral willpower to be an honest person and of course I would go back and pay for this merchandise. But sailing solo, I am pretty sure I would have sailed to my car with that bag, rationalizing my decision by saying what a loyal customer I was to this store, and they had probably overcharged me sometimes. I was certainly tempted to do that. What helped me do the right thing was thinking about some very honest people in my church...what would they say if they were here. If they were watching, what would they expect me to do? Now a bag of flour might not seem like a big deal, but it has to do with justice. The community holds me to a higher standard; they remind me who I am as a baptized follower of Jesus.

Or I think of another time. I was in my early twenties in a new church. I was a newcomer; I'd been there maybe a month. And as I was standing in the foyer, a new woman walked through the front door. She was probably around twenty years older than me, someone I had never seen before. And she wasn't dressed right for church, and she was talking too loud, and she just didn't seem to fit. And there was this little thought in my head, "I sure fit in this church better than that woman!" And I thought back to the very warm welcome I had received from everyone, particularly the pastor and some of the elders.

And I watched as people welcomed this woman. They welcomed her with warmth and courtesy and hospitality, in the same proportion as they had welcomed me. And that welcome extended for weeks, I saw them greet her every week, sit with her and talk to her, I saw that she was being invited out for lunch ...she was being absorbed into the community just like I had.

Later I found out that she had had a very hard life, she'd been working on the street as a prostitute, she was fighting a big drug problem. And that she was the same age as me, she just had been through a lot more than me.

The apostle Paul writes, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” In Paul’s time there were great divides, great walls between Jews and Greeks, there were social boundaries between people who were slaves and people who were free. In today’s world, I don’t see distinctions between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, but I knew there was a great divide between this woman and me. I had no interest in crossing that divide, I would have been happy if she drifted away. But the people in this church I was attending were welcoming. They knew that this woman, this new believer in Jesus was filled with the Spirit too. Her gifts were welcomed, were needed in the church too. When you are a part of a Christian community, you see people differently. You see each person as a conduit for the Spirit, you value each person.

This is a countercultural attitude, because we live in a world that would divide us into “us and them”. Last week, a person filled with hate went into a club in Orlando and killed 49 men because they were gay. Hatred made manifest. Or you hear politicians talking about Muslims as if every Muslim is a terrorist, as if every Mexican is a threat. Or closer to home, we see discrimination against people who live on the street, or people who live in jails, or people on welfare. Every one of us has discrimination in our hearts for someone, the “them” out there.

These evil forces work in big ways in our society, but they work in insidious ways in our own personal relationships. In community, God reveals a new way to us. In our church community, every people group that we would exclude, every “them” out there, becomes our brother and sister, who have gifts from the Spirit that we need to survive in this world. God shows us that we are all interconnected.

Here’s the challenge. For people here who have been baptized, look around the church community. What is the Spirit teaching you through each person here? And are there people or groups of people you would rather not see walk through the church door? Will you pray that God will help you understand the depth and wideness of God’s generosity who gives the Spirit to each one?

A pastor I used to know faced a difficult situation in his church. He had been involved in prison ministry, and through that ministry he had come to be friends with someone who had been convicted of sexually abusing a child. This man had hurt a child, yet in prison he had become a Christian, and now that he was being released he asked whether he could come to my friend’s church. The church talked about it, processed it, about whether they wanted to allow this man to come, and if they did, how they could include him safely. I remember the pastor telling me that at one of the first church meetings this man attended, someone prayed for him, “Let his life be a gift.” And the pastor said, “That was what I saw happen. He was able to bring something to our community that no one else could have brought.”

If you belong to this church, will you pray that God will help you understand the depth and wideness of God’s generosity who gives the Spirit to teach one?

And there are people here today who maybe are only beginning to think about Jesus. What does Jesus have to offer me, you wonder? How would my life be different if I followed Jesus? What does it mean to belong to a church?

There are lots of ways to meet Jesus. Sometimes you meet Jesus through a spiritual experience, like the apostle Paul. Maybe it’s through a very low time in

your life, you're at the end of your rope, you can do nothing else but pray. Or maybe it comes when you open the Bible for the first time in your life, or maybe it's just a sense of the majesty of God you get from looking at the world around you. Whatever it is, maybe you want to start thinking more about God, and you come to church. And you get to know Jesus.

But sometimes it's the other way around. Sometimes people meet the community first. They become welcomed here, they become a part of a loving group, where no one is excluded, where each person is valued, where we see the Spirit flowing through you. Having an experience where you are valued like that, is a way to meet Jesus, and understand what he is trying to do in this world.

The Spirit calls us as individuals, and the Spirit calls us into community. Each person has something to contribute, each person has much to learn when we worship God together with all our hearts and souls and minds. Witnessing a baptism today is a joyful moment in the church's life, where we celebrate the commitment, that joining.

It's my prayer that we will go from here today remembering the words of the apostle Paul, "We have received the Spirit of God." We receive the Spirit of God together. Thanks be to God.