

After a very long and boring sermon, the parishioners filed out of the church, saying nothing to the pastor. Towards the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons. "Father, today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God." The pastor was thrilled. "Nobody has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why." "Because it endured forever." If any of you say that to me after mass – you are excommunicated! And Jesus won't be your friend!

On January 6, 2015, President George H.W. Bush and his wife, Barbara, celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary. The former President tweeted his wife the following message: "70 years ago this very day, Barbara Pierce of Rye, New York, made me the happiest and luckiest man on earth." Those are touching words. They remind me of another couple married 67 years. When asked how it survived so long, the wife said, "We were raised in an age when something was broke, we didn't throw it away. We fixed it."

In like manner, I think of the day a man or woman, after years of study and apprenticeship, at last receives their medical or legal certification or engineering degree. Or anything similar where we work for years on a particular goal. We ask ourselves. Will I make it? Will I be good at it? Will I advance? Will I succeed in my life's choice? Will I be loyal to its principles and what I promised? It's all weighty stuff. It's about how we find meaning and purpose in life.

Which brings me to baptism on this feast when we remember that Christ Himself was baptized. In the early centuries, baptism only happened after a long process of preparation, study and apprenticeship. It was considered a major, life-changing, courageous undertaking – only entered upon after years of work.

Baptism today hardly provokes a hesitation or a ripple. Few people seem to think of its weight or its ramifications. This is a drastic change from the past. At one time, baptism into the Christian faith was a truly scary and brave thing – with dangers of persecution and betrayal. It meant living radically differently from those around you; it meant holding countercultural views that brought disdain, job loss, and ridicule. For example, at the time -- 2/3 of the society were slaves -- but a baptized person believed that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God.

Baptism meant loving enemies and praying for those who persecuted them. At the time, it was unheard of to hold that exposing unwanted babies to the elements was wrong. Baptism was radical, out-of-step stuff. Few were willing to consider it, and if they did, they spent several years prepping for it. Baptism was deeply serious stuff back then.

But what happened was success. When in the 4th century, Christianity became legal it became politically correct to become a Christian if you wanted the better jobs. And then the standards dropped and at one momentous slippery point in history, baptism became casual, a person's ticket into society, rather than into a faith community. Over the centuries it even became a private thing -- whereas for centuries it was a public, communal event witnessed and encouraged by the entire Christian community. It was also done generally only once a year – at the Easter Vigil.

Further, as believing correctly began to supplant living and acting and serving correctly, then gradually the only question that was asked was whether or not you were orthodox, not as previously – to the point of calling in neighbors and witnesses – are you moral, prayerful and compassionate? Do you serve the poor? Do

you welcome the stranger? Do you forgive those who have wronged you? Do you intend to live a Christ-like life?

In our time, the ultimate deterioration of this reversal was captured in Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece THE GODFATHER, where in an oft-cited spliced-in scene, simultaneously Michael Corleone is having his son baptized Catholic as his henchmen are killing his enemies. Oh, Michael was orthodox – he didn't deny the Trinity – so he passed muster for having his child baptized. In former days, he would not make it through the door till he repented of his ways no matter how much money he gave in the collection, or how perfectly he could recite the creed. And so baptism became a social rather than a life-changing, life-challenging event.

So what's changed with the meaning behind baptism then vs. now?

Gone are the long preparations, the long apprenticeship. Gone is regular public appearances before the bishop and fellow Christians who questioned you on your lifestyle and practice, your motives and sincerity, and your worthiness.

Gone is the mentoring, the beautiful and exotic ceremony at the end of Lent when you were anointed, when before family and friends – in a darkened place you and the others had to face west, the place of the sinking sun and darkness and shout, "I renounce, you Satan, prince of darkness!" and then turn quickly to the East, the place of the rising sun and shout, "I accept you, Jesus Christ, the light of the world."

Gone are the sponsors, who actually lived the life of Jesus themselves and guided you by their counsel and example. Now people have Aunt Susie as godmother because, even though she is divorced 4 times and never goes to church, she's family and besides, she asked you to be godparent to her child. Gone is the involvement and support of the whole community as people have their children quietly baptized on a Sunday afternoon with no one there except some close friends.

Gone are those old baptismal pools shaped either like a womb or a tomb – one emphasizing new life, the other, death to sin and one's former way of life. Gone is the totally correct concept – that being baptized is far more important than being ordained a deacon, priest or bishop, that it is the most important sacrament of all because, like being knighted in medieval times, it is an initiation rite into the whole life-long way of love and service, a very public declaration that, as a Christian, we will seek to live the life of Christ at every moment: at our job, our school, in our marriage, when we fill out our taxes – even if it costs us.

Gone is the memory of the voice that said to Jesus at His baptism, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." We don't hear it anymore. We don't think of ourselves as forever beloved of God, beholden to God, branded, as it were, with God's seal.

Gone is that sense of calling, of vocation through baptism. Gone is the sense that with baptism I now have a responsibility to be involved in the church – support the church with my tithe and share this gift of faith with others. For many, baptism has become a mere cultural event with no real meaning -- like having a birthday party, and with no promise to try and live a gospel life. And it shows. It's why we are having so little impact on the world around us. We're just like everyone around us. American Catholics are hardly different from American pagans or atheists. Trying to get all we can out of life. Not particularly generous with what we have. Not much interested in a gospel life, a life about others, a life about service.

So what's the remedy? We need to listen again to the words addressed to Jesus at His baptism, for they are also addressed to each and every one of us. "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

Everyone of us is a beloved son, a beloved daughter. This is our truest – and deepest identity. We are not what we own, buy, or consume. And while we probably do know that, we are so easily side-tracked to think that we need something external, something that costs, to give us our identity. No -- we already have a deep identity given to us by the God who loved us into being. Our true identity is God-shaped and God-sized. Nothing in this world will ever satisfy our God-sized hearts. What we all want is to love – and to be loved. This alone will satisfy the human heart. And it's all given to us in baptism. We merely need to claim it, live it, celebrate it, enjoy it.

It will not guarantee a life of ease, a life without pain, a life without struggle. But it WILL guarantee a life of meaning. And only a life of meaning will leave us happy for having had the gift of this one, wonderful life we have been given.

Today is a reminder of what baptism can be – what it should be – what it could be. We look back at the ideal and review the way it used to be, was meant to be, to see baptism for what it really is: a solemn rite of initiation into living the best life we can – a life based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

It's a good time, on this feast of the Baptism of Jesus, to remember that we have been baptized, that we have been christened – “Christ-ened,” if you will – that we are identified as Christians. It's a good time to remember what being baptized is all about: a commitment to live as Jesus would have us live.

It's a good day to imagine that someday before we die, we too would be able to tweet someone, like George Bush tweeted his wife, Barbara, and say, “So many years ago this very day, Jesus Christ made me the happiest and luckiest person on earth. Through baptism, He made me His follower. He showed me I am beloved – and so is every other person in the world. I hope it has showed by the way I have lived my life.” (adapted from William Bausch, FROM NO TO YES, p. 31-34)