

-I'll come out and just say it: I love peanuts and peanut butter. I always have. We keep multiple jars of peanut butter in our kitchen and Abby always makes comments about how quickly it disappears. Most days I eat the same thing for lunch that I ate when I was a little kid: a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (for which the best peanut butter is the stuff they have in the bulk section of Good Food store that grinds the peanuts there on the spot). It's creamy. It's salty. It's nutty. What's not to like? In fact my favorite candy still has to be anything chocolate AND peanut butter flavored. My mom makes THE BEST cookies which were staples of my childhood: peanut butter and M&M cookies. Thank goodness I don't have a peanut allergy because I don't know what I would do.

-Even as a young boy I was pretty crazy about peanuts and I remember the first time I saw actual raw peanuts (I must have been 6 or 7 years old) was at church after worship. You can probably replay this pretty well in your mind: a six year old boy asks "what are those." My mom offhandedly replies: oh, those are peanuts, honey. The six year old boy thinks to himself: "I LOVE peanuts" and grabs a handful of them and chows down. I remember thinking to my 6 year old self: "wow, these taste good but gosh they are hard to chew." I probably had eaten about 6-8 peanuts before my mom started shouting: "No! No! Don't eat those with the shells!" Turns out, peanut shells can be pretty sharp and cause intestinal bleeding which my 6 year old self found out a couple hours later. Not that I needed to go to the hospital or anything, but I did figure out that when you eat peanuts raw again, you have to lose the shell before getting to the peanut.

-Turns out, there are a lot of things like peanuts which require a process of losing a covering or shell in order to get at the actual item. This is very important, I believe, in having within the back of our minds as we read this gospel story of Jesus and baptism.

-Ofcourse, actually, only the second part of this story has to do with Jesus and baptism, the first part (which a lot of folks tend to skip over) focuses on the difference between Jesus and John the Baptist. I got to say: it's a little bit freaky if you are reading it out of the blue.

- "And all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming.....He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." I don't know about you, but to me, this on the surface sounds like: "yeah, just wait for Jesus after me. He's the one who can really send you to Hell." Unfortunately, this is how many Christians and how many churches throughout history see this text and furthermore see baptism.

-I encountered this way of thinking a lot when I was chaplain at a Minneapolis hospital with a NICU where parents of fragile babies would push hard to get their little ones baptized so they wouldn't go to hell if they didn't make it. I could see it in their faces how damaging this "Jesus the boogeyman" theology is.

-For me, this warped interpretation is not based in the reality of this gospel text. The historical reality, I believe, begins at verse 16: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." One can translate the Greek here as saying: "wind and fire." Wind and fire were common symbols of the Holy Spirit or the powerful presence of God.

-Biblical scholar Fred Craddock writes: "Farmers of the ancient world poured wheat from one container to another on a windy day, or tossed the wheat into the air with a fork or shovel so that the chaff (or husk) would be separated and blown away, leaving the grain clean. This chaff burned with explosive combustion. To this day, farmers know that a fire in a dry wheat field cannot be contained or controlled... [Thus,]the primary aim is to save the wheat, not to burn the chaff." What if we saw baptism not as a "ticket out of hell" activity, but as a foundational inspiration to let go of our shell?

-Again, I don't think this text is talking about "separating the good people (who go to heaven) from the bad people (who go to hell)" at all. Instead, it's pointing to the fact that we all have "wheat" and "chaff" in our lives. We all are called by the holy "wind and fire" to separate the things that are in our lives which we can turn away from to the things that really matter. That, of course, is the root meaning of "repentance" (Metanonia) to "turn direction".

-So, then, we get to this very sticky debate of baptism and what baptism does. I was having a conversation with Pastor John Lund of Emmaus Campus Ministry at the University of Montana who gets this question all the time: why does baptism matter? If God loves everyone anyways, why does the church want me to get baptised? This question, from young students in their 20's, comes out of what I would call "spiritual trauma" where in many cases these young people are rejecting baptism as a "get out of hell free" card. You know what? I think it's a fair question for the church to wrestle with. Why baptism?

-Ofcourse I can't answer this question entirely, probably, in one sermon. But I can offer some thoughts. I'll offer three thoughts all in connection with freeing ourselves from the "husk or chaff" in our lives.

-1) *We baptise to create a "jumping off" point for faith.* Baptism isn't just a one and done thing, but a beginning of a journey. As Lutherans, it is deeply embedded in our tradition to harken back and rediscover our baptism: even unto death. Pastor John Lund calls baptism the "fire in the arse" moment. Recall how Jesus really doesn't start his ministry until age 30ish. We have a few stories of him being a child, but really we don't know what he was doing all those years before this moment. This baptism experience became a "jumping off" point for him to call disciples, to start preaching and teaching, to start revealing who God is in a very radical and different way. It became an avenue to go deeper into faith. This is true for those baptised today too. Baptism isn't static, but a platform and calling to go further, deeper, and push the bounds of our comfort zone.

-2) *We baptise to create relationship and community.* Notice who was in attendance at Jesus' baptism. Just a few verses before it says: "the crowds" and "even the soldiers and tax collectors." There is no question: this is a public event. Many Lutheran theologians argue baptism is almost more about the church community surrounding the baby being baptised than it is about the baby. Centered around the waters, the community of Christ makes a commitment: "to support and pray for them in their new life in Christ." I can't tell you how meaningful this was to Abby and I when we were part of Piper and Soren's baptism this summer with all y'all at the Blackfoot River. Baptism at it's very essence creates the family of God. It creates relationship and real commitment to one help, support, pray, and guide one another. We can't turn away from the things that don't matter in our lives without the family of God rooted in baptism.

-3) *We baptise to publicly show God's love for us and the ENTIRE world.*

-Let me be clear: John Lund's students are correct in saying EVERYONE in the world is a child of God whom God loves. Let me also be clear that baptism doesn't make God "love someone more". But, baptism is a formal act of the church in response to God's love. It is making the sign of the cross and God's love public. It is the church's way of formalizing a love of the divine for the world saying as it does in our OT reading of Isaiah today: "I love you." Think of it as similar to a marriage ceremony: it's very true that people can and do love one another even if they are not married. But the marriage ceremony, a formal act, changes that love and makes it public. For when the world sees God's radical love, community, and commitment, maybe it can make a difference for someone else.

-Baptism stands as an important pillar of the church and the church's witness of "shedding the chaff" and turning to the things that matter. May we be moved by this holy and formal act to go deeper, love one another as brothers and sisters, and publically live out Christ's love to the world. Amen.