

A church without a font

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Baptism is the ritual doorway through which we enter Christian life. So I always found it strange that one of my churches had no font. They only had a small silver bowl given to them by another congregation when they were a new church start, 40 years before I arrived. They only brought it out for baptisms, so there was no visible reminder of the sacrament in the sanctuary.

This fact troubled me so much, I started bringing in a big ceramic bowl and pitcher from my own kitchen for baptisms. But I realized something more permanent should be arranged. I asked the governing board if we might have a font designed and paid for from memorial monies. They had the money, but no one had the initiative to work on the project, so nothing happened.

After about a decade, I began to see my tenure at that church coming to an end. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving them without a font, so I made arrangements myself to hire an artist and woodworker, who fashioned a ceramic bowl and wooden stand designed to fit in the sanctuary space. One member agreed to review the design and, when it was approved, the governing board gave us the funds to pay for it.

This was a bittersweet task. I remember one day when the ceramic artist came by to discuss the bowl, I confessed to him that I thought the church might not stay open much longer, and I broke down in tears. Some part of me had imagined that, with a font to symbolize the new life we experience in Christ, maybe the church would experience some sort of new life of its own. But it was not to be. While the font and water are powerful, mystical symbols, they are not magic.

Finally the artist arrived with the bowl. The watery glaze inside was more beautiful than I could have imagined, but the artist was apologetic: during the firing, a tiny crack had formed in the bowl that could not be repaired. He vowed he would make us a new bowl, but he was about to have surgery, and it would be several weeks before he could do the work. We agreed we would use the cracked bowl until then;

hopefully nobody would notice.

One Sunday, we held a blessing for the new font, and everyone dipped their hands in the water, remembering their own baptisms. Another Sunday, we filled the bowl with sand and placed lit candles inside it. Weeks went by, and nobody noticed the crack. I knew it was there, and I grew attached to that bowl because of it. It seemed like it fit that little, struggling church well.

Paul writes, “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:7-9)

There were so many cracks in that church’s life, and yet somehow, God’s work got done in spite of them.

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