My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Baptism is a curious ritual, one that seems intimately connected with Christianity, but if we asked 100 random folks on the street if Jesus was indeed baptized, we might expect 50% might say yes and 50% might say no. But most folks, almost 63%, say he was NOT. So why do we in fact think Jesus needed to baptized?

Jesus’ cousin was John the Baptist, the son of Elizabeth, to whom Mary fled after finding out she was pregnant and spent three months until Salome delivered her child. John the Baptist is the one who lept in Elizabeth’s womb upon Mary’s arrival. So John knew for a while that Jesus was, indeed, the chosen one of God.

And yet, John the Baptist is the one who promises forgiveness of sin through baptism. This is the one that the Gospels write about, pledging repentance, turning our lives around, and walking away from sin for all time.

But a good amount of biblical scholarship also now thinks that before John became this fire-and-brimstone preacher who gives only two choices of life and death, he honed his spirituality and prophecy as part of the Qumran community. The Qumran community, you might know, are the ones from whom we get the Dead Sea Scrolls. John’s gospel was also primarily influenced by these folks who lived there, called the Essenes.

Now, we don’t know much about Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30. But it’s safe to say that Jesus might have spent some time with the Essenes and staying with his cousin John the Baptist, and John might have been that older sibling influence that helped Jesus figure out how to deal with both ultra-faithful Jews and how to express faith to folks who weren’t Pharisees or Saducees.

Jesus might have been a star student of John’s, and the Essenes had a baptism ritual which was entry stakes into their community and faith. Jesus could have learned baptism from these folks, seeing its transforming power and how it could affect lives. It would get us out of the quandary of Jesus needing to be washed of sin, right?

What is baptism at its heart? (take all answers).

One thing we could do, is better educate people about baptism. It’s theologically rich, but most people don’t know why. It’s a very beautiful picture and physical sign of grace, but it’s mostly misunderstood except as a necessary entry stakes into all things Christian. Why get baptized if we don’t know what it’s for? Tradition alone isn’t, and shouldn’t be, the motivation.

But baptism can also be recalled as perhaps a less than satisfactory event. If we were raised in the UCC tradition, and we think back to our baptism, we cannot remember it. We were infants at the time, and we didn’t have a say in the matter—our parents and Godparents wanted us blessed as soon as possible. Maybe if we were raised Baptist or had the opportunity to ask for it when we were older, it just doesn’t have the meaning we embrace if we had to decide it again today. Sacraments aren’t just missing holiness, but meaning.

It’s why a lots folks don’t participate in communion. Now, we don’t believe we’re taking in the literal body and blood of Jesus. Nor do we believe in a God which demanded that his child should be bloodily murdered in order to forgive creation its transgressions. That kind of God damned all to hell, including most if not all of us? Do we remember that? It’s part of our reformed church and Calvinist roots, called pre-destination: no matter what we did, God had a secret list of who could be saved and going to be in the Book of Life, and it was guaranteed not to be us. Our Puritan ancestors were a stern lot indeed.

So it’s not hard to see why folks don’t look at us doing our rituals of communion and baptism and run the other way. This kind of heavenly power game is not our faith. We understand God and Jesus to come from a place of love, and loving people don’t hurt others, they help ‘em. *There aren’t entry stakes into God’s grace*.

Jesus intended his perspective and teaching to be this: remember me and what it costs to live out love each and every time you have a simple meal. (repeat paragraph)

Scripture never mentions infant baptism. It never says that babies can’t be baptized by sprinkling rather than immersion. But it also never says Jesus was afraid of being hell-bound because of disobedience to God.

Baptism, for Jesus, was a way to identify himself with a given ministry and mission. He took responsibility for whom he discovered he was and who he would become. That also meant becoming responsible for his life and what he’d do, no matter who approved or not.

The word “Baptist” was originally a derogatory term used by Anglicans who made fun of a little sect of that baptized adults who’d already been baptized as babies. That little sect sometimes sprinkled a few drops on the head, and sometimes they immersed full body soaked to the bone.

But the Baptists had a point they were trying to make: baptism publicly showed their commitment to the Jesus movement as they understood it. They were seen, publicly, proclaiming THIS faith, their faith. Refusal meant a repudiation of their responsibility. King James I was not pleased that there was a split in the Church of England, and officially he tolerated them after many years of bloody revolution with the Catholics over religion. But that was waaay different than accepting the Baptists.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. The important thing here in our modern faith is the condition of our heart, not the sprinkling of water or where the altar is.

We’re a lot more than this or that act, and yet we still do the sacraments. We do these to demonstrate our faith and to participate across the generations and the historicity of our faith tradition. These things are done in remembrance but also to remind us that we are connected to following Jesus as the God of love that we now understand to be active in the world. We do this to say that for the Jesus movement in our hearts, we say yes. Yes I will do and want life beyond the gathering of things. Yes I do want identity to be more than what I do or who others say I am. Yes I do want to know that I am better than my worst moment and can survive to live in love another day.

So do we do baptism to embrace a new direction not just for ourselves, but knowing that it is a God for all peoples? What is our profession of turning toward that mission? For the answers of our faithful heart,

Thanks be to God, Amen.