

TRYING SMALL

Brian Palmer – ELCA Pastor/Missionary serving in Totota, Liberia



It's William's 1st birthday being celebrated within the church. The two sasas are held by already baptized Hannah on the left and soon to be baptized Joanna on the right.

Casting Out Fear

There are some common misconceptions in Liberia regarding baptism. Two that stand out as I write this are:

1. If someone is baptized as a small child and then later leaves the church God will hold the parents accountable for the sins of the child.
2. Once you are baptized you are expected to lead a holy life and therefore it is better to postpone baptism until after you have had an opportunity to sow your wild oats.

These beliefs are so well engrained as to virtually preclude any possibility of infant baptism. Indeed, since being in Liberia I have yet to witness the baptism of anyone younger than a teenager and the average age of baptism is probably around 25 years.

This gone Christmastime Joanna, who is 15 years old and one of the most active members of the church I serve, asked to be baptized. A little conversation later landed on us announcing a joint baptism/confirmation class for anyone desiring to be baptized and/or confirmed on Easter Sunday. The class has been well attended by 6 or 7 teenagers and one woman who doesn't know her age – her name is Hawa and I'm guessing she's about 60. Hawa only speaks Kpelle so she comes to class and then meets privately with Joanna to find out what was discussed. Hawa was baptized and confirmed ever since but just wants to know more about the faith.

Easter is coming and I just asked the class who among them intends to be baptized etc. Currently there are three slated for baptism and four for

confirmation – the rest are undecided. I've made it clear that there is a deadline, and they must decide sometime between now and my announcement in church that those desiring to be baptized are invited to come forward.

I have fought mightily to convey a sense of giftedness within the sacraments but it's hard:

- The misconceptions mentioned earlier come straight out the baptism service in the Green Book. Read it carefully for yourself while emulating the Vulcan embrace of technicality.
- Several of the students asked to be immersed in the local stream. In consultation with the senior pastor of the parish, I had to tell them no.
- Hannah asked to be baptized a second time as she doesn't remember her first baptism. I had to tell her no. Sadly, she now wishes she had lied about having been previously baptized.

- They had to *take a class* to qualify to receive the "means of grace."

The Church has a long history of changing money and selling doves with one hand while overturning the tables of the money changers with the other. We restrict access to God's business while simultaneously declaring the gifts of God to be free.

The blessing of having smart, mature people of faith coming to class is they can appreciate the irony and tension within the Church's position. Every Easter is special, but I believe Easter 2022 is going to uniquely endear itself in my heart. What do they call it when the planets are in alignment? Only here, instead of Venus and Mars and Jupiter, I'm seeing the promise of salvation and remembrance and forgiveness. Instead of lions and tigers and bears, I'm seeing body and blood and "for me." Instead of gradient, divergence and curl, I'm seeing faith and hope and love. Oh my!