

Baptism: A Tether to the Sacred

January 12, 2025

Baptismal Prep

If we were to ask the majority of Christians the world over what baptism is, they would respond with something along the lines of it is a ritual followers of Jesus partake in for the forgiveness of sin. And they'd be right...kind of. The ritual component of baptism is true, but the sacrament we celebrate is so much more. It does include an element of forgiveness, true, but the church's sole emphasis on forgiveness and sin disempowers baptism, making it one note rather than a chord or a symphony.

One of the things that I always talk about with families as we're preparing for baptism is the two scripture passages we read today. We reflect on how, in all four of the Gospels, we hear of people gathering in the wilderness to hear John preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, of Jesus being baptized, and when he is baptized, a voice from the heavens proclaims some variation on, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Beautiful isn't it? "You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Each year, as the church pivots from Christmas and into the adult ministry of Jesus, we're invited to start by reflecting on baptism, both Jesus' and our own. Did you notice who was talking about repentance and conversion and sin? John the Baptist. Did you notice who was talking about belovedness and being well pleased? The Holy Spirit.

Friends, John's ministry calling people to repentance and conversion is real and important. We just need to look at all of the greed and injustice in our world to know that acknowledging our faults and working to live differently is deeply needed. But for far too long, the church has emphasized the voice of John and has completely discounted the voice of the Holy Spirit.

"You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Repentance and conversion and the forgiveness of sin are important, but what a baptismal life does is root those things in our fundamental belovedness. Before we were broken, before we strayed, before we sinned, we were God's children, holy and beloved. This is what redemption is, then. It's a holy homecoming, it's a return to our absolute core belovedness. I'll often use tether imagery here.

Remember tetherball? We have a tetherball at Moon Beach. Think of God as the pole, we're the ball, and our baptism is the string. In life, there are forces that push us further and further and further from God, but our baptism is that cord that draws us back to God, back into God's orbit.

Later on in worship, we will sing a hymn, "I Will Change Your Name." Both lyrically and musically it's quite simple. Yet in that simplicity is a depth beyond measure. The text goes:

*I will change your name.
You will no longer be called wounded, lonely, outcast or afraid.
I will change your name.
Your new name will be confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one,
faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks My face."*

This is the core of baptism, that our foundational identity is that we are God's beloved.

The Scriptures

Every once in a while, I'll have someone push back on this. They'll say that the voice is saying Jesus is God's beloved, not us. To this, I would remind you that over and over again, the scriptures remind us that we are the body of Christ. We, together, make up Christ's continued existence, and therefore this heritage and legacy of belovedness is ours as well.

I also point to our Hebrew scripture for this week, Isaiah 43. If this passage isn't already bookmarked and highlighted in your personal Bible, I encourage you to do so when you get home. This passage is at the beginning of what scholars call Deutero Isaiah, the portion of the book that was written during the Babylonian Exile. For those of you who don't recall, the Babylonian Exile was the period in Jewish history in which a substantial portion of the Jewish people were forcibly deported to Babylon and the Temple, their center of worship and religious identity, was destroyed. Not only was the mass deportation physically and culturally devastating, it rocked their faith, in part, because one of the foundational covenants that Judaism is rooted in is the promise from God to Abraham that his descendants will always have the land. During the Exile, the people of God do a lot of soul searching, a lot of questioning.

Today's passage is an overture into the next chapter of their life. It presents us with a medley of the greatest hits of the relationship between God and the people. It names creation and the flood and fires, all alluding to previous scripture stories, and most important for our purposes today, God says to us, "You are mine." And "You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you." This belovedness is core to our baptism, but it's not the only facet of the sacrament that we've under emphasized over time.

Baptism also initiates us into Christ's death and resurrection. Baptismal fonts are created in all sorts of different shapes, intended to emphasize different aspects of the faith. Ours here at Union is eight sided, intended to represent the "eighth day." The theology goes something like this: God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in it in seven days. The eighth day, then, is the day of resurrection, the day of new life and rebirth.

Eight-sided fonts are pretty common. A friend of mine used to serve a church that was built in the early '70s. Their font was a giant plaster mold of hands, intended to represent that in Baptism we are held in the loving hands of God.

Did you know that across Europe, there are even fonts shaped like coffins, intended to remind us that included in our baptism is also a dying to our old ways? So, death and life also weave their way through our celebration of baptism.

A scene that always comes to mind when I'm trying to help people access this aspect of baptism comes from Downton Abbey. I assume that since it's been off the air for a decade I don't have to give a spoiler alert. The show follows an aristocratic family in England. In one story line, the eldest daughter, Lady Mary, who has always been rather cold and calculating, has fallen in love and married. Everyone is over the moon, not only that she seems kinder, but also that she just seems more human, more alive. Then, literally as she is giving birth, her husband, the man whose love has brought her to life, dies in a car crash. Of course, this devastates Mary. At one point in her grief, she admits that she doesn't feel she's "going to be a very good mother,

because, somehow, with Matthew's death, all the softness that he found in me seems to have dried up and drained away. Maybe it was only ever there in his imagination." Her mother-in-law tells her that the bottom line is for Mary to choose between death, or life.

It's an incredibly touching scene between two strong women, both of whom have faced great challenges in their lives. When Mary's father says that he feels it's everyone's job to keep Mary safe and secure, her mother-in-law vehemently disagrees. She tells him that everyone's job is to bring Mary back into the land of the living and give her purpose.

Friends, along with tethering us to our divine belovedness, our baptisms initiate us into the triumph of life over death. In baptism, we celebrate that life is stronger than death, love stronger than fear, hope stronger than despair. And in that new life, we come to the final aspect of baptism we'll emphasize today: commissioning. Our baptisms SHOULD shape our behavior.

So, quick question here. Can you tell if someone is baptized? Maybe they'll wear a cross or something, but walking down the hallways of school, sitting across from someone in a job interview, pulling alongside someone in traffic, can you tell if they're baptized? Should you be able to?

In solely focusing on baptism as a me-and-Jesus moment that cleanses me from my sins and punches my ticket to heaven, the church has missed a critical opportunity to remind us that our baptisms should set us apart. I'm not talking about giving us an air of superiority or making us think we're holier than thou. Rather, just as Jesus' baptism commissioned him into his ministry of sharing the good news, so, too, our baptisms ought to launch us into our work of bringing about the reign of God. Living our baptisms should make it harder for us to swindle or steal. It should make it harder for us to exclude and easier to stand up for mercy and justice and healing and hope.

Conclusion

Twenty or more years ago on President's Day, NPR did a story in which they talked about various U.S. Presidents, their virtues, and which one the on air personalities thought would be the best babysitter. They talked about Washington and the stories of his emphasis on honesty, about how, while Lincoln was a great man, they doubted he would have a disposition that would connect with kids. They imagined Teddy Roosevelt would be exciting, getting the kids outdoors, but wondered if he might be a little lax on safety protocols.

When they opened up the phone lines to get listeners' input, all of the callers said that of the former presidents, the babysitter they would want for their children would have been Jimmy Carter, because of his integrity, because his humanness brought that out in others. Many of you watched President Carter's funeral this week. In his eulogy on Thursday, his grandson Jason Carter, said this:

"My Pawpaw's public face and private face were the same...
he had a 100-year love affair with humanity,
truly taking to heart the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself."

Friends, living a baptismal life is about repentance and conversion, about the forgiveness of sin, but it's about so much more. It's about striving to do the right things. It's about orienting our

values to God and then allowing those values to animate our spirits. A baptismal life is a life that strives to operate from hope, not fear, generosity, not ego. It's a life that shows grace.

As we go forth this week, you're all in my prayers. May the facet of baptism that is most genuine to your current state of being shine brilliantly in your life. May you be rooted in your belovedness, and may this tether you to the divine. May your baptism and your community bring you back to the land of the living and give you purpose. And may that purpose be so profoundly wedded to the ways of God that people will know you are a follower of Jesus by how you live.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22
January 12, 2025