

Reflections on Baptism

Luke 3:21-22

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This is a great day! We have celebrated the sacrament of baptism for two amazing young children, one earnest and eager middle schooler, and a young adult who is heading off into the very grown-up world of military service. The room is filled with joy. So, I thought I would spend just a few minutes now sharing some stories and thoughts about baptism and how we are to understand it.

Every baptism that I have ever participated in is its own a special story. Here is my very favorite: One day, when I was serving the Meredith church, I was meeting with a group of recent widows, and we were talking about baptism. The oldest member of that group, 88 years old, grew very, very quiet – unusual for her. Then she turned to me and said, “I don’t know if I was ever baptized.” Her parents had died long ago, she said. There was no family Bible with a record of it, and her mother had never talked with her about it. So, I asked, “Do you want me to baptize you?” She looked a little surprised, but said, “Yes, I do,” assuming, I suppose, that we would schedule a baptism during the worship service in a few weeks. But I went immediately to my office and put on my robe. (After all, when an 88-year-old asks to be baptized, you don’t wait around!) All the widows in this group of old friends, gathered round the baptismal font, representing the whole church. They smiled as they pledged to help this 88-year-old woman grow in faith. I was so glad that we went ahead with that baptism that day, because she was diagnosed with terminal cancer just a few months later, and she passed away as I held her hand, less than a year after her baptism. Recently, I asked you to share your thoughts with me on the meaning of baptism. Several of you said what is usually true: baptism marks the first steps in the Christian life, an ingrafting into the family of faith, a commitment for the future. In the case of my dear 88-year-old friend, the commitment had been made long ago, without being marked ritually. The walk in faith was near its end. For her, baptism was a benediction at the end of her life, and I was so honored to be present for that moment.

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When I was about to graduate from seminary, I met with other UCC students to practice answering questions for our ecclesiastical councils. The scary question, the one no one wanted to be asked, was “What do you do if a parent, who is not a member of the church, comes to you and asks you to baptize their child?” There were apparently some clergy in that Association at the time who delighted in tripping up seminarians with this question, because the “correct” answer in terms of UCC polity was that the parents were supposed to join the church first before the child could be baptized. But none of us wanted to give that answer, because it meant turning away a child and certainly alienating the parent from the church. I did hear that question asked at a friend’s ecclesiastical council, but fortunately, no one asked it of me, so I thought I had escaped the dilemma. But ministry has a way of presenting all the dilemmas, whether you want them or not. Shortly after I graduated, when I was serving as the licensed pastor of a tiny church in Massachusetts, a grandmother came to me. Her family was Roman Catholic. Her daughter was a single mom with a new baby, and they wanted that baby to be baptized. They NEEDED that baby to be baptized because they understood baptism to keep him safe from hell, even as an infant. She had already been to the Catholic church, where the priest turned her away because the parents were unmarried, and her heart was broken that this precious infant might be in mortal danger without a baptism. Would I baptize her grandchild? I was in silent turmoil for maybe 30 seconds, which is a long time in a conversation. I could hear my polity professor’s voice, reiterating the “correct” answer: the mom would have to join our church first. But I could not make myself utter those words. Then I heard Jesus say, “Let the little children come to me.” And I said, “Of course we will welcome this child!” It was a beautiful baptism. It did not lead to a growth in our tiny church’s membership, but the grandmother did come to worship one other time to share a picture of her grandson and to thank me for baptizing him. And our little church honored our commitment to that precious baby by praying for him every month during worship, so long as I was the pastor there. Some of you will remember my friend Katherine Adams, who preached at my ordination here. I told her the story of this baptism, and she said, “Oh I never worry about those rules. My job is to make cracks for the Holy Spirit to break in.” I have taken that as my motto ever since.

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It has been many years since I told you the story of my own baptism. You know that when I was little, I went with my grandmother to her tiny Southern Baptist church. Now, Southern Baptists believe in the “age of accountability,” that is, no one is baptized as an infant. Only those old enough to profess their faith for themselves are said to be “saved” and therefore, only they can be baptized. They believe that young children are not held accountable by God for their sins

until they reach a certain age, and if a child dies before reaching the age of accountability, that child will, by the grace and mercy of God, be granted entrance into heaven. I hope you recognize that the theology of the United Church of Christ is very different from this. In my grandmother's church, the age of accountability was deemed to be six years old. Up until then I got a free pass from God. After that, I had a choice to make, and terrible consequences if I made the wrong one. So, one wintery day when I was seven, I responded to the altar call at the end of the service. The congregation sang "Just as I Am, Without One Plea," and with a few other folks in need of forgiveness, I walked, trembling, to the front of the church and whispered to the preacher that I wanted to be saved, and I asked to be baptized. I was nervous about the baptism itself, since it would be by immersion and I couldn't swim; but I was even more afraid not to be baptized, since I was an earnest child, and I had passed the age of accountability more than a year before. I knew I was living on borrowed time.

When the day for my baptism came, unfortunately, I had a really bad sore throat, and it was cold outside. Even in Texas, February is a cold month. My mother worried that getting my hair wet in the baptism and then walking outside to the car in the February chill would make me really sick. So, she gave me cotton to stuff in my ears and a white rubber swimming cap to put on my head during the baptism. It was just plain silly looking. Even as a seven-year-old, I could tell that that swim cap pretty much ruined my whole outfit. But my mother said I had to wear it, so off to church I went with my grandparents, with my swimming cap in my hand. At the point in the service when I was to be baptized, my grandmother took me through a little door that led behind the pulpit and the choir. I took off my shoes and socks and put the cotton in my ears. Then I stuffed all my hair up into the swimming cap and climbed the steps to the baptistry. The preacher was there, already in the water. He looked surprised when he saw my swimming cap, so I nervously explained about my sore throat, and then I climbed down the steps into the water with him. He pulled open the curtain so the congregation could see me. I couldn't hear what the preacher said very well, because of the cotton in my ears. Suddenly, he put his hand over my nose and mouth and leaned me backwards all the way into the water ... and to my great relief he brought me up again.

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You know, I can tell what faith traditions you were raised in by the way you describe baptism. Some of you, like me, were raised in denominations that understand baptism to be something like a fire extinguisher. I spent a lot of my life worrying about what happens after I die, but I don't worry about that any more. I have come to know that I am safe with God, that I have always been safe with God. And I want to tell you that you are safe with God, too, regardless of whether you are baptized. My 88-year-old friend had been held in God's loving arms all her life, and God did not require baptism for that. The baby I baptized in Massachusetts was safe in God's love, too, even though his grandmother feared for him. And seven-year-old me didn't need to walk, earnest and trembling, down the aisle with the other sinners for God's love to surround me and lift me up. So, if baptism isn't a necessary hedge against damnation, why do we do it?

I would say – with most of you who responded to my little baptism survey – that baptism is a public marker of our covenant relationship with God, and with the Church, the Body of Christ. We profess our faith, as best we are able at what is usually the start of our journey of faith, and we promise to grow in faith with the help of all these wonderful witnesses. The Bible tells us that God's promises are not just for ourselves but for our children and our children's children. That is why Joshua recounted all God's great saving acts from the Exodus out of Egypt, to the crossing of the wilderness, to the gift of the Promised Land, acknowledging God's faithfulness for generation after generation. And then he said to all the people of Israel at Shechem, "Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." He wasn't just claiming a covenant relationship with God for himself, but for his children, too. This is why we baptize babies and young children – to acknowledge and claim God's promises for them before they can do it for themselves, to say publicly, "This child whom I love is also a child of the Living God."

God's love is boundless. It washes over us all, again and again and again. May the blessings we have claimed here this morning, for Oscar and Olivia and Nadia and Tristan, the blessings that were claimed for us at our own baptisms, be near to our hearts today, and may God help us always to keep the promises that we made this morning, to grown in faith with one another.

Alleluia and Amen