

“to fulfill all righteousness”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 12, 2020
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:13-17

Will you pray with me. God of many names, grand parent of us all, remind us this day of the many meanings of baptism. Lead us into new territories of understanding your presence among us – whether we are baptized Christians, or unbaptized followers of Jesus, but all of us, your children, no matter our particular religious orientation or persuasion. Amen.

Here’s the question for the day: Does it matter whether a person is baptized or not? Many of our Christian brothers and sisters say, “Absolutely it matters! If you’re not baptized, you’re not going to heaven. If you’re not baptized, you will not be saved.” Their Christian ministry is focused on one goal – reaching as many people as possible and convincing them that following Jesus Christ as their savior is the only path to God and to eternal life. In this particular church, our individual answers to the question “Does it matter whether a person is baptized or not?” may be varied and not of one mind.

One of the best aspects of our federated membership with the United Church of Christ is that the UCC has no hierarchy in its polity, that’s its governance structure. Nobody from on high in the denomination can tell us how to be in our particular church. We, as a congregation, and as individuals, determine how we will live out our calling from Jesus, and what religious structures and forms and rituals we will follow.

In a few words, as it says in the byline of the United Church of Christ, “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” Baptized or not, Christian or not, believer in Jesus or not, doubter and skeptic of all things religious or not – we’re all welcome here. I don’t know about you, but I like it that way. It keeps me from becoming too high and mighty in my own religious leanings. It opens me up to being more willing to accept others as they are, not as I might want them to be, or think they should be.

Jesus did that – from what we know of him in the Gospels. He accepted people as they were. He might have told them to “go and sin no more.” He might have called them “hypocrites” sometimes. He might have wept and become angry and frustrated over their lack of understanding of what he was trying to accomplish in his earthly life.

But he accepted people and instructed them to love God and one another, no matter who they were. He invited all people to sit at the table of life, to worship before the altar of God, to live in the hope of eternal life in the Spirit. I believe we would do well to follow Jesus’ instruction and invitation and not concern ourselves so much about the specifics of the religious beliefs of those who choose not to join us in our particular church.

For even as we are all one in God, and I do believe that, we are *particular* in our church and in our individual lives. Baptism, to me, is about being particular, it's about naming. It's about making a *public* confession of faith. It's about naming an individual as a child of God from the reference point of the *Christian* faith. Most of us have chosen to make that public confession of faith in Jesus as our savior, our touchstone with God. Others have not. Some of us were baptized as infants, I was. So I didn't choose to become baptized, but my parents chose that I be baptized. I believe it is an individual decision, not one I, or anyone else, has the privilege, responsibility, or right, of trying to force onto another.

When I say the words of the ritual sacrament of baptism as I place drops of water on a person's head – whether they be three months old or ninety plus years old – I say to them, “their name, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit be upon you, their name, child of God, disciple of Christ, member of the church universal.”

I first say *their* name, and then I baptize them *in the name of* the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. You see, I believe it's all in the naming.

In our text from the Gospel of Matthew for this morning, a voice from heaven says over Jesus, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt 3:17) The voice from heaven names Jesus as Son, as the Beloved. Names. They're important. They identify who we are – to one another, and to God. Some of us have the same name. I can tell you there are a lot of “Susan's” running around! That name for a girl was big in the late 1940's and 1950's! But we all have another name, “child of God.”

Frederick Buechner writes of naming, “If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell you my name, I have given you a hold over me that you didn't have before. If you call it out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since.”¹

The author of the Gospel of Matthew writes, a “voice from heaven” names Jesus at his baptism, just as “an angel of the Lord” (Matt 1:20-21) tells Joseph, Mary's betrothed, before she gives birth, that he, Joseph, is to name the child Jesus when he is born. The world was once again turned upside down two thousand years ago in the birth of a baby named Jesus, in the baptism of a man named “my Son, the Beloved.”

The story of Jesus' baptism appears in all four Gospels, and you know what that means – it was VERY important to all the Gospel writers! No matter whether the story is told in two or three verses or the expanded five verses of Matthew, Jesus' baptism is a big deal in Christian belief.

And it's a big deal for several reasons. First, it signifies the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After his baptism Jesus goes out into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Then he calls his first disciples and they get busy ministering to anyone who will listen to them. Jesus is the preacher extraordinaire and a healer like no one has ever seen before.

The second reason Jesus' baptism is a big deal is it shows his connection to his Jewish heritage. “The term *mikveh* in Hebrew literally means any gathering of waters, but is specifically used in Jewish law for the waters or bath for the ritual immersion [that

¹Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973, 1993, p. 13-14.

took place in six different ways.] The building of the mikveh was so important in ancient times it was said to take precedence over the construction of a synagogue. Immersion was so important that it occurred before the High Priest conducted the service on the Day of Atonement [and several other very important Jewish rituals.] There were several Jewish groups that observed ritual immersion every day to assure readiness for the coming of the Messiah.”² So Jesus’ baptism links him undeniably to his Jewish heritage, much to the chagrin of some of our Christian brothers and sisters. Immersion in ritual waters is much more than a Christian sacrament.

The third reason Jesus’ baptism is a big deal is it connects him to us. Even though John says he should be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around, Jesus says, “No, you need to baptize me with water now for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matt 3:15) “This phrase is used in Matthew’s gospel to demonstrate the link between Jesus’ life and ministry and the work and promises of God [for all people]. Righteousness in this context means doing the work that God has given one to do. John’s work is to announce the presence of the Messiah and the coming reign of God. In baptizing Jesus, John’s mission is fulfilled.”³

Jesus, divine Son of God, yet fully human, comes into ministry to fulfill all righteousness in his own right – born of young Mary, the Prince of Peace of our Christmas carols, comes to begin the work that God anointed him to do. And so every time we share in a baptism in our church, we carry on the work which Jesus came to do. We baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I brought a visual aid this morning to help us imagine what baptism can mean in a person’s life. Here’s a bowl of water. Here’s a rubber ducky. What happens when the rubber ducky is put into the bowl of water? (get responses) It floats! That’s what happens in baptism, or can happen if we allow it to do so. We become immersed in the water of God’s love according to the teachings of Jesus, and we are held up for the rest of our lives so we don’t drown in the crises and tragedies of life. Through our baptisms, we are reminded of the ongoing and ever present awareness that we are not alone. We are floating on the sea of God’s love. With Jesus’ oars we row through life and manage to stay afloat.

Baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace.

Baptism is a promise and an expectation of God’s involvement in our lives.

Baptism is a way for an adult, or the parents of an infant or small child, to say “yes” to God in a public Christian way.

Participating in the act of baptism is a way for each of us to “fulfill all righteousness” in our individual lives and in our congregational family – righteousness in this context means doing the work that God has given us to do. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we begin anew each day to do the work of ministry each of us has been given to do. It is our choice. It is our privilege. It is our responsibility as Christians.

And let the people say, “Amen.”

²Dr. Ron Moseley in *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, January 13, 2008, p. 97.

³In *Seasons of the Spirit* for Sunday, January 13, 2008, p. 92.

