

“Beginnings”

Psalm 29, Matthew 3: 13-17

Baptism of Jesus/A, January 13, 2008

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I wish I could remember my baptism day. As a Christian it is a pivotal moment and so few of us remember what happened on that day. Who performed the sacrament? Who stood with you, sprinkled or dunked, where did it take place, what did the community say? In some ways I am grateful that my parents decided to raise me in my grandparent's church. My parents had a “falling out” with the Episcopal Church in which I was baptized as an infant. So for a while, my grandparents brought my siblings and me to their church. They became my spiritual caretakers at the Baptist church where we were raised up. There were many blessings in that decision. Our church was in the heart of Lawrence, MA. This old mill city had changed dramatically by the 1970's. Many of the mills had long since closed and it was a city on the decline. The population had become largely Hispanic and African American.

The First Calvary Baptist church was like many churches in the city. Its members were mostly white and had moved out to the suburbs. However, they refused to abandon their beloved church even as the neighborhood continued to change. They understood that God had a mission for them in the city. Driving into the city each Sunday I understood the difference between my neighborhood and the one in which the church was located. I admit, as a child, I did not understand the sociological importance of what my grandparents were doing. I do remember how I felt when I walked through the doors of my church. As a child, I felt beloved there. I felt welcomed and accepted and affirmed. My Sunday school teachers planted seeds that would bear fruit many years later.

As members and friends of South Church we do not all share a common experience of baptism. Some of us were sprinkled and some of us were dunked. Some of us received the sacrament as infants, others as adolescents and still others as adults. We come from many different faith traditions; Catholic, Baptist, Episcopal, Congregational, Greek Orthodox and the list goes on and on. We were not baptized into any of these particular denominations. We were baptized into the Christian faith to become followers of Jesus Christ. That is what we share in common. We received the sacrament and the affirmation of belovedness just as Jesus did when he came that day to the River Jordan.

I love baptism. I love when families bring their children to this font to be blessed. I love that in our tradition baptism is a community celebration and that as the church we take seriously the promises we make to each family and child. As a pastor I have faced some of my most difficult challenges around the issue of baptism. Some might argue that my views have been somewhat rigid or that I do not leave enough room for grace. I will never forget a moment during my CPE training. This critical training takes place not in the seminary classroom, but in a clinical setting such as a hospital. Typically one serves as a chaplain for a period of time under the supervision of a chaplain on staff. For ten weeks one summer, I worked for 40 hours a week at the Washington Hospital Center.

One Saturday evening, I received a page from the nurse on duty in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit. She called me to perform a baptism on a child who was gravely ill and in her estimation may not make it through the night. She insisted the parents had requested baptism, however, they could not be there because they were both physically and emotionally exhausted. That should have been my first red flag. I wondered why the parents would not insist on being present, or in fact, if I should even perform a baptism without them there. However, I admit, I was young, inexperienced and reluctant to question an authority figure. I performed this baptism with fear and trembling. As you might imagine, especially if you know anything about CPE, the verbatim I presented for this gave everyone something to talk about! I am not sure if the nurse ever told the parents what happened. I suspect they did not request this baptism at all. The child pulled through, and perhaps no one was the wiser. In my own embarrassment, I never mentioned it again.

This became a profoundly powerful teachable moment for me. Thankfully, my supervisor handled my spiritual blunders with grace and compassion. Clearly, I made many mistakes on that evening. However, this child was never harmed by my ineptitude. Her salvation was not dependent upon whether or not I got it right, whether or not I had overstepped my bounds or not asked the proper questions or did not have the courage to speak the truth when I needed to. God had already blessed her in her mother's womb. She was beloved by her family and by the staff at the hospital. It was out of this sense of belovedness that the nurse insisted I perform the baptism. Don't get me wrong, I suspect the call was prompted by this nurse's concern for what might happen to an unbaptized child if she were to die. God knows what would have happened, even if we did not have a clue.

When we are baptized there is no booming voice from heaven proclaiming our belovedness. I often wish there were. We so often overlook our own belovedness, dismiss it or discredit it. God declares emphatically that Jesus is beloved. Is the same true for us? When Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized by John, John's first impulse is to resist, to insist that he is not worthy, that it is Jesus who should baptize him. After all, Jesus is the greater one. Jesus understands that in order for his ministry to be authentic he must submit to another, to be baptized by one who is lesser than he, to accept the mantle of servanthood. Jesus does not need to be baptized for the repentance of sins, as John has told others, but to initiate this servant ministry. The pastor Erin Martin says, "in baptism, we too emerge from the water as beloved sons and daughters whose new life, in the pattern of Christ, is one of servanthood. We too are given the gift of submission. The challenge for those of us who are baptized is to live into the gift of our own transformation."

God invites us this morning to remember our baptism. This does not mean we need to find the photo album or dust off the Christening gown in which we were baptized. Rather, God invites us to remember the true power and meaning of our baptism. Baptism is more than a sweet, gentle moment where we stand before a congregation, receive the sacrament, make promises to each other and then forget it ever happened. Baptism is

something much more enduring, more endearing, more powerful and more controversial than that. It reminds us that each day is a gift, an opportunity to start fresh, to begin again. One writer says “‘Remembering’ our baptism then, isn’t a sentimental journey or an effort to recapture lost enthusiasm (ours or that of our parents and godparents), but closer to seeking equilibrium on a storm-tossed sea, getting our bearings, remembering who (and whose) we are.”

Whenever we come to the font of blessing, we recommit ourselves to a life in Christ. We can live this radical life of servanthood because like Jesus, we are beloved by God. God says, “you are my Son, my daughter, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” What powerful words of affirmation these are. I can do all things because I am beloved by God. Do I accept this affirmation? Do I live into this affirmation? Not always. However, I am grateful to hear these words again, reminding me of my belovedness, empowering me through this love to recommit myself to a life of faith. It is both a blessing and responsibility to be beloved by God. It is not enough to receive this love and simply be grateful. We must also find a way to share it. As a recipient of God’s love, I am compelled to be generous, loving, kind, compassionate, understanding, truthful and wise. I am to embody this belovedness, to embrace it and believe I am worthy of it with every fiber of my being.

Dean McIntyre tells a story about the greatest Christmas gift he received this year. It was a card from the singer and songwriter Ken Medema that contained a \$10 bill in it along with the instructions to use the money as Dean saw fit. He writes, “I had Ken’s \$10 bill in my wallet when I stopped at the grocery store on my way to work one morning. In the checkout lane next to mine was an older couple who spoke in a thick east European accent of some kind. They did not have enough money to pay for their purchases, which appeared to me to be all staples—no frills or extras. They were having to decide which of their purchases to send back to the shelves. I gave Ken’s \$10 to my own checker and asked her to give it anonymously to the young woman checking out the older couple. It covered their deficit and allowed them to keep a few dollars in their pocket. They were gratefully confused as I watched them head for the door.”

This sense of belovedness engenders a generous spirit. I challenge us to live by the belovedness standard. I challenge us to surround ourselves with friends and family that will affirm our belovedness, who will challenge us to live into the fullness of our own giftedness, who are not afraid to speak God’s word of righteousness among us. I challenge us to affirm the belovedness of every person with whom we come in contact. It is hard to be angry with someone whom we believe is beloved. It is hard to do damage to another whom we believe is beloved. Perhaps we should see ourselves not as an open and affirming community, but as an open and beloved community?

Today as we remember our baptism, we recommit ourselves to a life in Christ, setting aside our old ways in order to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. I invite you to take a moment to focus on your belovedness, to let go of whatever keeps you from accepting this gift from God. I will light the Christ candle and allow its light to remind us of God’s everlasting love and presence on this journey of faith. May this be the year

when we come to believe that love is more powerful than hate and that light truly has the power to drive out all darkness? Remember your baptism and rejoice. Amen