

Responding to the Call

Show of hands...who here remembers their baptism?

Ok. Those of you with your hands raised, how many of you were baptized as infants?

Now, I must admit, I have absolutely no recollection of my baptism. There is one picture that my parents claimed was evidence of my being baptized. It is a picture of an older member of the clergy, whom I honestly do not remember, touching the forehead of a baby. Now, my parents claim that the baby is me, but I am a little skeptical. Being the younger of two sons, about 95% of the baby pictures in my family are of my older brother Jon. So, I am not so sure the baby in the baptism picture isn't him.

There is one solid artifact from my baptism though. It is the song that my father wrote to commemorate the event. The title of the piece is "Mark's Baptism Song," so I am fairly confident that it was originally written with me in mind. One of the verses goes like this...

"The simple act of words combined with water...declares the love of God for everyone...unites the family friends and congregation...celebrates a life of faith begun."

This is certainly one way to understand baptism, and in the United Church of Christ, where we traditionally practice infant baptism; these words seem to really capture that spirit. Really, they speak to the sacramental nature of baptism...an outward sign of inward grace. But a grace we all possess, as it is a freely given gift of God.

Another way to look at it is, perhaps, a bit more traditional, is as a cleansing of sins, or original sin in the case of an infant. The description of Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Mark supports this viewpoint, even for Jesus. In that account, John the Baptist fails to see Jesus as anything different. But our Scriptural passage from Matthew seems to call that view into question, at least for our purposes today. In Matthew's account of the scene, John recognizes Jesus as someone

special. Did Jesus, who is the one being baptized in this passage need to have his sins cleansed? Hmm...Let's go ahead and put that one aside...

But let's stay with the Gospel passage for today. I must admit, that reading this passage, I am drawn to explore a different aspect of baptism.

I attend seminary in Kentucky at the Lexington Theological Seminary. LTS is a Disciples of Christ affiliated institution, and as some of you may be aware, the Disciples observe baptism differently than we UCC'ers. The disciples practice a form of believer baptism, baptizing not infants, but children who have made the decision on their own, or probably with some input from their parents. In the UCC, our youth make a similar decision or commitment, but it is generally made at Confirmation. Ultimately, though, in either case, a personal decision is made in conjunction with one's parents and with the community of faith.

It is this aspect of baptism, or the combination of baptism and confirmation if you prefer, on which I would like to focus for a moment. For I believe, in this way, that baptism is in fact a response to a call.

We church folk talk a great deal about calls. We speak of the call to ministry, or in denominations that subscribe to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, a more universal call to discipleship. But calls don't have to be limited to the practice of ministry or work in the church; I would suggest that we are all called in many ways. My older brother is an attorney, and having grown up with him, and argued with him, I have no doubt that by becoming a trial attorney, he was fulfilling his professional call.

Baptism though marks a special kind of call. It is a call to a way of life, and to the acceptance of a new way of thinking. The gospel writers knew this. The passage which we read today contains some very important language to make this idea clear. Despite John's doubts of his worthiness to baptize him, Jesus chooses to be baptized. As soon as he came up out of the water, the heavens opened, a dove descended, and the voice of God was heard, "This is my Son, the

Beloved...” Each telling of the story from the three synoptic Gospels includes this statement by God. I might suggest that this is a fairly significant moment.

Back in the days when Jesus was around and later when the Gospel writers were doing their thing, the Roman Empire was going strong. It was commonly understood at that time that the Roman Emperor was the Son of God (or the gods). So, this language, used by the writers of the three synoptic gospels in reference to Jesus, a Jew, is quite revolutionary. And for Matthew, the only Gospel where this pronouncement by God is made to all around, this serves as an announcement to the world. Think about it. By saying that God has claimed Jesus as the Son of God, they are placing Jesus above the emperor, in fact above all temporal rulers and institutions. And, as far as the organized church to which these writers belonged, this language was sacrilege. The Jewish leaders of the day did not subscribe the school of thought that Jesus was the Messiah, so a claim like this was a direct challenge to the church as well.

So, the claim that Jesus was “the Son of God” at his baptism was an incredible statement at that time and place. This relatively simple statement, which we take for granted in our churches today, sent shockwaves through the civic and religious institutions of the early 1st Century. So, following in that tradition of baptism, our own baptisms have a much more layered meaning than we might have initially believed. Through our baptism we respond to a call to place our faith above all temporal categories; above political parties, above nationalism, above even perhaps the organized religion to which we belong. We are called by our baptism to be first a follower of Christ, above all else. We are called to work for peace, to support the poor and marginalized, to show love and acceptance to the others in our midst, no matter their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or faith practice.

This past October, the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, John Thomas, along with others from the national church were arrested when they went to the White House to deliver anti-war petitions calling for an end to the war in Iraq.. They were there not as Democrats or Republicans, not even as concerned Americans, but as Christians.

In November, along with 300 leaders from Christian denominations, including the UCC, endorsed a document that responds positively to a call by Muslim leaders seeking common ground between Christian and Islamic religious traditions. In a world in turmoil, fueled by religious misunderstanding and extremism, this group stepped beyond their denominational and traditional bunkers and joined hands toward the goal of peaceful coexistence... a faith ideal held in common among both faith traditions.

A local UCC church in Simi Valley last year became engaged in a stand-off with the local, state and federal governments when they offered hospitality (or sanctuary if you prefer) to an immigrant woman and her infant child. This small congregation acted not based on partisan politics, or out of anti-government zeal, but instead acted based on the Christian belief in offering hospitality and refuge to the stranger among us.

Recently, televised debates have been held featuring the Republican and Democratic candidates for their parties' nominations for President. Among the issues discussed has been the Recognition of Marriage Act. Hearing the responses from the candidates, people of faith, Christians from many denominations, in particular the United Church of Christ, have contacted many of those candidates to express their concern over their opposition to this proposal. Among the candidates to express opposition who has been contacted were each of the Republican candidates and most of the Democratic candidates, including John Edwards, Hilary Clinton, and Barak Obama, a member of a UCC congregation. These individuals acted not based on party affiliation, or even out of denominational loyalty, but based on their firmly held Christian ideals which call for equal treatment for all.

My field education work while I am in seminary is with the Kentucky Council of Churches. This ecumenical effort brings together clergy and laity from an incredible range of Christian denominations to work toward a common vision. And, similarly, more locally, through groups like Progressive Christians United, people of faith work across denominational lines, based on their response to the call to be Christians first, not Methodists, nor Lutherans, nor Episcopalians, nor UCC'ers, not even Catholics or Protestants, but merely as Christians seeking unity in Christ.

Here at Irvine UCC, members participate in Amnesty International, peace vigils and marches, community events, inter-faith dialogues. They are not doing so as liberal agitators, or proselytizing evangelists, but as loving, concerned Christians.

These are just a few examples of what it means to live out the call of baptism, following in the tradition of Jesus' own baptism, and the ministry on which he embarked following this event. Jesus consistently challenged the power structures of his world, both civic and religious. He called upon us to love God and neighbor. He challenged us to think outside our own sphere, and look to the needs of the poor, the orphaned, the marginalized, the strangers among us. Our baptism calls us to do all of this, living according to the teachings of Christ and based on the model he provided, placing these ideals above all others.

Coincidentally, the final verse of the song my father wrote for my baptism is as follows...

“To lead this child with patient understanding...to follow truth and wisdom day by day...to work for peace and value human freedom...we commit ourselves and humbly pray.”

To follow truth and wisdom. To work for peace and value human freedom. Isn't it really these core ideals to which we hold that represent our response to Christian baptism. If I may, I would ask you join me in a moment of silent reflection to consider the call of our own baptism, and to perhaps recommit ourselves to living first by our faith ideals in all aspects of our lives, seeing ourselves first as Christians, called to action and compassion in a world in desperate need of both.

Amen.