

## “Raised to Walk in Newness of Life”

January 9, 2022

Every minister has a favorite baptism story, so since today’s sermon is about Jesus’s baptism and I’ve never preached on baptism before, I’m going to tell you *two* baptism stories, both from the time I was Minister to Children here at Lake Shore.

*When Allison Bucy was about seven years old, Allison and her mother, Carolyn, were at a friend’s swimming pool one Sunday afternoon. At one point in the afternoon, Allison paddled up to Carolyn, who was sitting on the edge of the pool and said, “Mom, can I be baptized?” And Carolyn said, “Allie, we’ll have to talk to Sharlande about that.” Sensing an end to that conversation, or at least a pause, Allie swam back across the pool. But a few minutes later, she was back. “Mom, if I can’t get baptized, can I get my ears pierced?”*

A few of you were at Erin Wilson Chrisman’s service yesterday and heard me tell a baptismal story about her, too.

*When I came to Lake Shore, Erin was six years old. When Erin was starting elementary school and learning all the things that first graders learn, I was learning the things a young minister needs to learn about being a minister. I needed a lot of practice doing ministerial things. I still do!*

*So I practiced sitting on the steps telling stories to children during worship, I practiced breaking bread and pouring juice from a pitcher into little tiny cups, and, with the children, I practiced helping people who were hungry and hurting in our neighborhood and around the world. I practiced, with the children, picking beans in the garden out back – and I practiced learning how to talk with children about these things.*

*When I had been at Lake Shore about two years, something came up that I wasn’t quite prepared for. The next Sunday I was supposed to baptize a little girl named Annie. Though I had seen what seemed like hundreds of baptisms, I had never baptized anyone before. No one had ever taught me exactly what to do. I needed practice! So the Saturday afternoon before I was to baptize Annie, Ed Wilson, who was our Minister of Music and also Erin’s dad, brought all three of his children to the church for me to practice baptizing!*

*While the baptistry was filling with water, their dad said to the children, “Now you all go change!” When they came back, they all had on their swimsuits! I put a baptismal robe over my shorts and t-shirt and we practiced baptizing – over and over and over again. I was trying to concentrate on fully*

*immersing each of them by dipping them fully under the water, but I admit I really got tickled – all because Erin was getting the giggles – over and over and over again.*

*Every time I raised her out of the water to a standing position, she beamed when I said the words, “Raised to walk in newness of life.” They were her cue to take the steps out of the water and get in line behind her brother and sister to practice baptism again.*

Now to the story in Luke’s gospel for this day after Epiphany Sunday, the Sunday that the church names “The Baptism of the Lord.”

The gospels tell us there was quite a crowd at the river’s edge – people from the whole Judean countryside and all of Jerusalem. They made their way out into the wilderness to hear John preach and to line up for baptism because . . . well . . . because they were waiting for life to begin, because it seemed to them that they were and had been living in death, in exile for too long. It seemed to them that things had been wrong for too long, and they were hoping that things could be right for them. They were hoping for freedom from Roman rule and exploitation. They were hoping to be able to feel good about themselves as a nation, as a people again. And John — with his call to get ready for a new thing God was doing and symbolizing that readiness with baptism — was offering them hope. God was going to make things right, and life, real life like it was supposed to be, would begin again.

Don’t you wish we knew what the people thought when they saw Jesus get in line for baptism with them? Most, if not all of them, probably had no idea who he was. To them, Jesus looked just like every other 30-year-old man waiting in line that day. It’s likely he was dirty and dusty, just like the rest of them. His face probably held a mixture of joy and apprehension, just like the rest of their faces did.

If you did not know better, you probably would not have paid attention to Jesus at all. John told everyone that the One for whom he was prepared was so powerful that John was not even worthy enough to tie the sandals of the one to come.

Yet Jesus just simply showed up. That is how all four Gospels record it. Jesus came and stood by the river as he waited to go into the waters of baptism just like everybody else.

John had been preaching baptism as an act of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, passionately emphasizing the truth that our baptism signals a turning from sin and a turning to God. But why was Jesus there? Perhaps he was starting to realize that he wanted to do the right thing to live into his call to ministry. Or maybe he lined up there with everybody else because, frankly, baptism is what incarnation is all about: the proclamation that God in Jesus is not content to be separate from us, but desires to join us, to be one with all that we are and all that we do.

Perhaps that identification with us, the people with whom he came to live, is the primary function of Jesus's baptism—so that we will know at our own baptisms that Jesus himself stood in line, shoulder to shoulder, with fragile and broken people like you and me. Maybe Jesus was baptized that day so he could experience all of who we are in order that we might become more like who he is.

In his book *A Season for the Spirit*, Martin Smith describes the fleeting images that struck him when he saw a Pasolini film called *The Gospel of Matthew*. They shattered any idea Smith had of Jesus standing alone before God. Instead, in the film, Jesus is surrounded by masses of people who are also in the water and on the river's edge who, like Jesus, came to be baptized by John.

The message that Jesus received at his baptism is the message for every person in line before him and behind him, including us: "It is a moment of opening ourselves to the compassion and solidarity with our struggling, needy human beings."

Desmond Tutu says that when we remember our own baptism, that remembrance is really about togetherness: "If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only

together, that we can survive only together, that we can be human only together, then a glorious world would come into being.”

In the wealth of stories about Archbishop Desmond Tutu since his death the day after Christmas, I read about a time when he was speaking to a gathering of Christians during the height of South Africa’s apartheid regime. “What keeps you going?” someone asked. “What makes you so sure that justice will prevail?” Tutu let go with his infectious laugh and threw up his arms and said, “But I’m baptized!” The audience was stunned. He laughed all the more and continued, “‘Baptized into Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.’ This is God’s promise to us, my friends. God is faithful and God does not break promises. Remember your baptism!”

God claims us at our baptism. God sends us unearned, unconditional love our way. “This is my beloved child, whom this day I choose as my own, not by the child’s merit but by my mercy!” That’s what God said to Jesus at the river and what God says to you and me: “I choose you as part of my family. I choose to “walk with you . . . through the waters, and the rivers shall not overcome you . . .and to walk with you through the fire, and the flames shall not consume you . . . you are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you . . . So fear not, for I choose to be with you, in all things, in all times, in all places, in all circumstances, now and forever. I choose to love you whether or not you think you are lovable.” That’s the message of baptism.

The Spirit calls to receive the blessing of God’s children at our baptism. And naturally, when we are caught up in this blessing, we want to be on mission with God in our wounded, weary world. In the waters of baptism, we are cleansed, called, claimed, and commissioned to be the hands and feet of Christ on earth. We are given new identity and belonging. We live in the community of Christ and receive a unique call to discipleship. We all have a role to play in the unfolding story of the transformation of the world.

Once we become aware of how deeply we are loved by God, we find ourselves falling in love *with* God. And we express that love by how we do our living in the world. That, I think, is what it means to be called. It really is that simple. God loves us into loving more deeply, drawing us into the waters of the fountain of love flowing “deep and wide, wide and deep.”

The Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove – but that is not the end of the story. Like Erin and me, when we were practicing baptism, getting wet all over, we may not have realized it then, but we were preparing to hear the voice that echoes through baptism after baptism, century after century, to each one of us: “This is my beloved child.” That’s why we set aside this day in Epiphany – to remember our baptism.

Last week I mentioned a baptismal practice that I adopted some years ago. It fit the sermon last week, so I told it then; but it fits today, too. So here’s that remembrance again: *I tell anyone leaving the baptismal waters, “Remember these waters. This may be the only time you step into them. Stay in here while the congregation sings the next hymn. Stand on the steps and feel the water drip off your robe as you walk out. Remember. This is a holy place. From the old life to the new life in Christ . . . through the waters of baptism . . . into the world to serve . . . You are God’s beloved.”*

God is forever raising us to new life, to mission and ministry. When the call seems daunting, remember that you are sustained and carried by God’s love for you.

And . . . just so you know . . . At the right times for each of them, Allie and Erin were baptized – Allie by her grandfather and Erin by her father.

Oh . . . and Allie got her ears pierced, too!