

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

YOU ARE MY CHILD, THE BELOVED

Luke 3: 17 – 22 January 10, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Baptism. Beginning. Filled with great expectation. That describes the crowd of people who were coming out to hear John preach in the wilderness. They thought he might be the long awaited Messiah. But John made it clear, he was not the Messiah. He would baptize them with water, the Messiah would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

The church spends far too much energy and thought on the mode of baptism. Immerse. Pour. Sprinkle. We get caught up in the mechanics rather than the meaning of baptism. Today, I would like to get past the unimportance of how much water, to the meaning of baptism. It is more important than we think.

Luke has used many words to tell us of the birth of Jesus and the birth of John. With just these few words – “when all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.” Luke provides this baptism as a hinge from John’s preaching to the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. People are wondering – is this John the one, the Messiah? John stops all that talk by saying right up front that he is not worthy to untie the shoes of the one coming. John is put in prison by Herod. This one half of a verse marks the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

According to Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was “with all the people.” Jesus apparently simply got in line with everyone else who was tired of this selfish world and had given up on themselves and God. This line of people responded to John’s message. They wanted to hope for a new beginning. They are damaged and broken people who need God. They need a new beginning. Jesus joins them.

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It might be a good question to ask whether we as a church today truly identify with the damaged and broken of this world. Are we willing to stand in line with them, to welcome and work with them as brothers and sisters in Christ?

I think it important that Luke does not have Jesus say a single word at his baptism. After he is baptized, Jesus prays. Undertaking a ministry of teaching and healing, Jesus seeks strength and guidance beyond his own. Prayer is the thought, the reflection, the act of adjusting our will to the will of God. This Spirit of God will encourage him along his journey, even when the way becomes difficult.

James Weldon Johnson has written a prayer that the church needs to remember as it worships.

O Lord, we come this morning
knee bowed and body bent
before your throne of grace.

O Lord, this morning
bow our hearts beneath our knees
and our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning

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like empty pitchers to a fountain full.

When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "you are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

A part of our baptism ritual is a question asked of the parents, "What name is given to this child?" It is a question I always ask even though I know the name of the child to be baptized. Then, the child's name is called in baptism. It is an identity. It is marked at baptism. Austin, Memphis, Liam, Fairlyn, Sunny. "You are my child, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

The message from the heavens in Luke is directed to Jesus, not to the listeners in the crowd. We don't know that they heard anything. It is about Jesus, his self understanding, who he is in relation to God. I believe this baptism points Jesus in the direction of service to God that he sought to live out all of his life.

It is a powerful affirmation- "You are my son, my Beloved. You are my daughter, my Beloved. I am well pleased with you." When we have this affirmation – it strengthens our identity, our will, our ability to act from this secure identity. Without this understanding – whether it comes in baptism or some other act of recognition - most people will struggle with low self – esteem throughout their life.

One of the most important acts of parenthood, friendship, is to affirm our children, our friends.

He was crushed. He was crying. He rung my front door bell and was standing there when I opened the door. He stood there, a half filled plate of food in his hands. His words were hard, yet soft. "I couldn't eat another bite in that man's house." That man was his father. He continued, "I have never, ever, in my whole life done one thing that pleased him. Can I come in and finish my supper with you." The boy was an eagle scout. He is one of the smartest people you will ever meet. He was faithful in his church attendance – sang in the youth choir. He was honest. He is thoughtful and kind to people and animals. He was dependable. He was a good person. Yet, it was hard form him to know that he was a valued person because his father had not said to him or taught him, "You are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased." It is still an issue in his life today.

Baptism Sunday. Not the day to argue over the mode of baptism. It is the day to looks past ritual to what it means. The Good News of our baptism is that it tells us – in word and in deed, that in Christ we are all the Beloved. With us, God is well pleased.