

## **RENEW YOUR BAPTISM**

Matthew 3:13-17

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When you make your way to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to renew your driver's license, you have, at some level, decided that you want to participate in the act of driving. You want to be eligible to drive a car. When you renew your passport, you are deciding that you want to participate in international travel - at least be eligible to do so. It takes some money and some effort to renew your driver's license. I know it took me two trips to the BMV last fall in order to have all of the right paperwork; it required some patience and persistence on my part. Renewing my passport was easier, but more expensive. I wouldn't do it just for fun. I only did it because I plan to travel. I've made the choice to travel.

This morning we are inviting you to renew your baptismal vows, to remember that you are a baptized Christian. It is an opportunity to make a decision, a conscious choice to live as one who bears the name of Christ.

I walked into the BMV in October. The process of obtaining a new driver's license didn't make me a better driver. I was the same driver leaving their parking lot as I was when I entered it. But yet something was different. I now carry a new driver's license. The state acknowledges that I am qualified to legally drive for the next four years.

At the end of the sermon today I will invite you to walk towards the baptismal font, touch the water, and make the sign of the cross on your forehead. You won't look any different on the outside. Yet something will be different.

Leo will wake up tomorrow as the same child he was when he woke up today, yet something has changed. He has officially entered the community of God's baptized people, a community that stretches back 2,000 years - a community that straddles the globe. His parents are different, because they know that we have all prayed for him.

Baptism isn't magic. It is an affirmation of a truth of which we need to be reminded again and again: we are God's beloved children. God has created each of us, God loves us unconditionally, God gives us the gift of grace, forgiveness even before we ask, and God provides a path for us to walk...when we walk that path, we will experience joy and meaning. The path is called discipleship.

We will be talking about discipleship throughout this year. One definition of discipleship is found in the UCC vows of adult baptism - vows you'll be invited to renew today. One question asked of adults before baptism is this: "Do you promise to walk in the ways of Jesus, resisting oppression, showing forth love and justice?"

In other words, baptized Christians promise to notice inequities and injustice; we are not given the luxury of averting our eyes when we see hatred and bigotry. Resisting means, first, noticing, and then speaking out, speaking up, engaging in work to create a more just and peaceful and loving world.

It is the way that Jesus lived, beginning from the moment of his baptism. What gave him the courage - as an unemployed, itinerant person who didn't own anything - what gave him the courage to speak up to government and religious officials? What gave him the strength to keep going, when he encountered enemies and threats at every turn? How did Jesus stay motivated when the Pharisees tried to trick him, when he saw how Roman governmental practices were unfairly taxing the poor? Could it be

that he constantly remembered the moment of his baptism? That moment when his cousin John held his body under the water, and then lifted him up? And as he felt the water dripping off of his face, he heard God's voice saying, "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased."

Whenever Jesus would begin to forget, he'd go off by himself - he'd climb a mountain, hike into the desert, or row out on the water, just for a little time to himself. And when he found enough silence, then he could hear it again, the voice of God saying, "You are my beloved child." In those words Jesus found his identity, his calling, his vocation, his way of life. Then he could return to healing, teaching, storytelling, to walking, laughing, confronting...He treated those around him as God's beloved children, too, restoring their hope and dignity.

I actually remember my baptism. I grew up in the denomination known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), one of the partner churches to the United Church of Christ. In the Disciples tradition, infants are blessed and dedicated, but baptism happens at the Confirmation age. I was about twelve when my dad baptized me in the First Christian Church of Pittsburg, Kansas. I was baptized by immersion on Maundy Thursday, along with a group of my classmates. I was the same as I'd been on Wednesday, yet on Thursday night, something changed.

When I was in the eighth grade, we moved from Kansas to Indianapolis. My dad took a job in the denominational headquarters. We joined a church with a large youth group made up of students from several different high schools in Indianapolis. I sat with them every Sunday morning. We'd have donuts before church, we'd giggle during church, but we'd listen too. I remember hearing sermons but mostly I remember what I

felt. I felt like I belonged. I felt at home. Something was happening to me, too, in all those hours I spent at church, at youth group, and on retreats. I went to church because that's where my friends were, and they were important to me. But as I talked with them, learned with them, worshiped with them, my faith was being formed.

When it was time for college, I decided to go to a small liberal arts school that was historically and loosely affiliated with a church. Three religion or philosophy courses were required for graduation. I signed up for a religion course that sounded interesting my first quarter, and I still remember some of what we read. One day the assignment was short. We were told to read one sermon, written by a famous theologian named Paul Tillich. I have in my office a book this thick, Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology. He was an intellectual, a professor and also a pastor. But the sermon we were assigned that day was not difficult reading. It was entitled, simply, "You Are Accepted." This deep thinker was able yet to put something simply: "Because of God's grace you are accepted. Your job is to accept the fact that you are accepted." Of course the sermon goes on from there to talk about discipleship - how we are to live as God's beloved children.

But let's not go there just yet. Let's stop and take in these words of Paul Tillich - note they're not the words from some self-help book or the cover of a magazine; these are the words of a person with a Ph.D from a renowned university in Germany. This is where it begins. "Accept the fact that you are accepted." Hear God saying to you, "You are my beloved child; in you I am well pleased."

When I first encountered those words as a college freshman, I realized that what I was reading was the same truth I'd been feeling all through high school. I'd thought of

church, faith, religion, as a matter of the heart - and now that I was understanding the concept of grace from an intellectual point of view, my head and my heart were coming together. I'd felt accepted, but now I understood what it meant.

At that point I didn't think of becoming a religion major. I'd never considered ministry. But that class was the beginning of that journey for me...that sermon, those three words, "You Are Accepted" changed my life.

I believe they can change all of our lives, in different ways. If anyone has ever told you you're not good enough, if you've heard voices calling you "dumb" or "stupid" or "bad" — if you have those tapes playing in your head, remember these words, "You are my beloved child. You are accepted." Most of the times we are our own worst critics. We put ourselves down, we compare ourselves to others. "You are accepted" doesn't mean you're perfect; it doesn't mean we aren't always called to grow and change. But it means that, at our core, we are loved by the God who created us. It's the only place to begin living a healthy life, a life that will make a difference for good in the world.

Here's how the writer Henri Nouwen puts it: "You are not what you do, although you do a lot. You are not what you have collected in terms of friendships and connections, although you may have many...you are not the success of your work, nor its failure. You are not what people say about you, whether they speak well or whether they speak poorly of you...none of these tell the truth about who you are. I am here to remind you in the name of God that you are the beloved children of God, and that God says to you, 'I have called you from all eternity and you are engraved from all eternity into the palms of my hands. You are mine. You belong to me, and I love you with an everlasting love.'"

That's the holy voice to which we become awakened through the mystery of baptism, a voice that changes everything.

This weekend we remember the legacy of Martin Luther King. In his book, Letter from the Birmingham Jail, he responded to white ministers who asked him to slow down and not press so insistently and stubbornly for equality and justice. "Can't you be patient?" the ministers asked King.

He wrote, "When you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers, when you find your tongue twisted as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park, when you see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky...when you are forever fighting a denigrating sense of 'nobodiness', then you will understand why we can't wait.

At the heart of King's leadership was not only a passion for social and political justice based on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, but a deeply held theological conviction, a deeply held biblical truth, that human beings — every human being, regardless of color, race, gender, station in life, nationality, religion, income, sexual orientation - every human being is a child of God, everyone is called Beloved.

As God's beloved children, we are called to remember God's words of acceptance and love again and again throughout our lives, and to affirm that they are spoken not just to us, but to all. It is our calling as disciples of Jesus, to spread the good news of God's accepting love to everyone who needs to hear it, and everyone does.

I invite you to join with me in the renewal of baptismal vows: