

Baptism of Jesus (2020)  
Matthew 3:13-17      Isaiah 42:1-9

It's happened to other Pastors and it's happened to me. Pastors sometimes get requests that cannot be fulfilled. I have had people call me, often it is a grandmother, asking if I would baptize her grandchild. I ask if the parents have a church home where they live. "No," they will usually answer, "They don't go to church. But I was baptized in your church 50 or 60 years ago and I want to get my grandchild baptized there."

I then ask what church she is currently attending. "I don't go to church anywhere either" is often the answer." I then go on to explain that baptism is a sacred act in which both the parents and the church make a commitment to God to live in such a way as to instruct this child in the faith and in the ways of the church. If I would baptize this child, I would be taking part in a pretense because there was no intention in following through with the promises she and the parents would be asked to make. It would also prevent the Congregation from following through on the promises they would make to care for that child. At that point, I have to say that I could not do the baptism.

It is at that point that they can become upset and accuse me of not being a good pastor or a Christian. It is a difficult position to be in. There seems to be little commitment to living and participating in a Church community, but is there a point where, someday, God may work through that experience and bring them into full participation?

The Membership Committee of the Church and the Church Council have been reviewing the membership of the Church for several months now. January is the time when we are required to file our Annual Statistical Reports which, in part, ask about the number of Professing Members of the Church and what United Methodists call "Constituent Members." The Reports asks about the number of persons who are baptized but have not made a public commitment to live out their faith in and through this Church. There is another category of unbaptized children and others who are in relationship to the church and for whom the church has pastoral responsibility.

Sometimes people will become part of a church by attending and becoming involved. Sometimes when people join a church they may be baptized in their new church, or in other instances there may be a transfer of a church letter. A church letter confirms that someone has been baptized, has been a faithful church member, and is in good standing with

their last congregation, but for the most part these church letters are formalities. We're not going to track down references to make sure that this letter is true. After all, why would someone lie about being a Christian?

Church letters were not always a formality as they are today. In the early Christian church, they served as letters of recommendation, proof that someone was actually a baptized Christian, or was at least "in training."

Once upon a time and perhaps even today in areas of hostility to Christianity, letters of recommendation may be needed. In an era when our faith was illegal, a Christian letter was needed to confirm that these individuals were true Christian believers, and not spies out to arrest Christians. Those letters are a "voice" witnessing to that person's identity.

One thread that we can pull from our two Bible readings today is the reality of a voice: in this case "the voice of God." In the reading from Isaiah, God is speaking and says, "Look at my servant . . . He is my chosen one." In the gospel reading from Matthew, a voice from heaven says, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy."

In both of these readings, who is God talking to? Is His servant only the pastor or a church council member or a committee member or a musician? It does seem to be someone whom God has chosen. Does he choose everyone? Is this passage for you, a member of a congregation and for anyone and everyone who considers this their church home? Is the voice in Matthew only for Jesus or for anyone who is a son or daughter of God?

Many voices clamor for our attention. There is a voice that says, "Prove that you are a good person." Another voice says, "You should be ashamed of yourself." There is a voice that says, "Nobody really cares about you," and one that says, "Be sure to become successful, popular, and powerful." But underneath all these often very noisy voices is a still, small voice that says, "You are my Beloved, my favor rests on you." That's the voice we need most of all to hear. To hear that voice however, requires special effort; it requires solitude, silence, and a strong determination to listen. That's what prayer is. It is listening to the voice that calls us "my beloved."

I believe that voice speaks to each one of us at our baptism and our commitment to live out our faith in this church and the welcome we receive from the congregation is a sign that marks our entry into the faith and family of Christ.

Baptism is both grace, the action of God, and also an individual commitment and promise. In the Wesleyan tradition, and in the United Methodist Church and in other denominations, we believe each person must at some point make a personal decision for Christ. But for Wesleyans, converting people to Christ is not an end-goal; nor is it necessarily a one-time event. Rather, conversion for Wesleyans is a lifelong process of growing into deeper discipleship and deeper relationship with God in Christ.

Our journey toward discipleship, becoming more and more like Jesus and becoming more and more Christian, begins with baptism. When we baptize an infant or child, we are initiating them into the community of God's people. We mark them with water, symbolically recognizing before the community of faith that even though they do not yet recognize it for themselves, God's grace is within them. We pray for the Holy Spirit to guide them on their journey. And we promise as a community of faith to show them, by our example, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ so that one day they will experience God's saving grace and make a confession of faith in Christ for themselves.

As United Methodists, we believe that experiencing the assurance of God's grace is a critical step in the journey toward a deeper relationship with the living Lord. But we also believe that the way it happens varies widely. For Methodists, there is no single way, and not even necessarily a single moment, in which someone suddenly changes status from "unsaved" to "saved." It is a process and a journey.

For many, the heavens have been opened, God has spoken, and conversion happens. Conversions can occur throughout our lives, in experiences big and small, formal and informal, public and private. As United Methodists, we don't limit conversion to being a single, definable event. Conversions are steps along the path in our journey to live more fully and perfectly as sanctified disciples of Jesus Christ. Conversions happen whenever we are reminded that God's grace, which was recognized in our baptism, has not just been planted, but has taken root and is continuing to grow in us.

Today the church continues to use the waters of baptism as a sign of death to our old lives and resurrection into new lives in Christ. We celebrate the grace of God as we are born anew and receive forgiveness. In baptism, we remember that we are the children of God, loved by God and pleasing to God.

This is why it is so important for us to remember our baptisms as we do today and celebrate them as a worshiping community. Because as Methodists, we don't believe it is something we have done, such as saying the right words, that has saved us. We believed it is God who has saved us. It is God who reached out to us first, in love and prevenient grace. It is God who sent Jesus into this world to show us how to live as God's people. It is God who has saved us and offered us eternal life!

Then comes our response and our commitment to work at growing our faith and continuing to live out our promises by participating in a church in whatever way we can for as long as we can – using the gifts we have to the fullest extent we can.

God continues to speak to us – continues to call us dearly loved. Can you still hear it? “You are my dearly loved daughter . . . my dearly loved son.” We may be uncomfortable today speaking of anyone as God's chosen. But God's call is to service, not to privilege. Anyone who hears God's voice in one way or another can discover she or he is God's beloved.

And as we live out our call, people see and notice how we live out our call as Christians and as members of a church. There was an older man who attended worship faithfully. What was so unusual was that the man couldn't hear very well and he couldn't see very well either. So, as far as participating in the worship service, it was marginal at best! Yet, there he was, Sunday after Sunday. One day, a good friend of his at church asked him: “George, I'm curious. I know you can't hear or see very well and that most of the worship service is probably not very meaningful to you. So I'm wondering, why do you come?” George didn't hesitate a moment. He replied: “I just want people to know whose side I'm on!”

Today the heavens are opened again. And a voice is heard from heaven, saying, “This is my dearly loved son or daughter, look at my servant, who pleases me.” Today is an opportunity once again to respond to God's call and make our promises to live out our faith in and through this Church. It is our chance to be a light to those who walk in darkness and cannot see or hear the voice of God. It is our chance to be a life preserver to those who are floundering and drowning. It is our chance to be salt for the earth and share the flavor of God's kingdom to a world which too often settles for what is not filling or healthy.

Today the heavens are opened; God speaks. Do you hear it and are you willing to come and follow? Are you willing to say whose side you're on?