

From the Community Pulpit
“The Supreme Gift of A Warm Welcome”

#2 in the EVERYDAY SACRAMENTS series

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, September 25, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Introduction:

*There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place,
and I know that it's thee spirit of the Lord.
There are sweet expressions on each face,
and I know they feel the presence of the Lord.
Sweet, Holy Spirit, Sweet heavenly dove,
stay right here with us, filling us with your love;
and for these blessings we lift our hearts in praise;
without a doubt we'll know
that we have been revived
when we shall leave this place.*

I heard that sweet, sweet song first here at Community. Who exactly sang it – Kimi Yokoyama Whipple, Susan Heim-Davis, Kathy Huey – I can't exactly recall. But I remember hearing it, and feeling extraordinarily welcomed by it.

You and I have been welcomed in a thousand different ways at Community. By a handshake at the door. By a smiling countenance beaming at you. By a song sung with passion and conviction. By the person serving you communion. By the child traipsing by you on the way to the children's sermon. By a bag of groceries from the Food Pantry. By the paraments on the chancel. By the person serving you coffee at coffee fellowship time. By a wondrous art exhibit in the Steeple of Light Gallery. By a hug. Even by the air conditioning in this place of worship. And that's only scratching the surface of the myriad of ways we've all been graced by a sense of welcome here at Community. All of it says "Welcome!"

The song "*There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit*" and those reminders about welcome seem to me to be a fitting introduction, perhaps the best possible introduction, to illuminate our theme for this morning: the sacrament of baptism and the importance of being welcomed into the faith.

We're continuing our EVERYDAY SACRAMENTS series. And I would repeat the classical definition of what a sacrament is: "*An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.*"

And it is the symbolic power of baptism that is prevalent in Jesus' life – at its beginning and in its earthly conclusion. Now, while the prevalence of baptism in Jesus' life isn't really strong enough to make us Baptists, it is sufficiently impressive to cause us to sit up and pay attention!

Jesus made baptism a prime focus for his followers in what has become known as "The Great Commission," which we've already heard in the scripture reading from Matthew's 28th chapter. But please see also that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, everything also starts with Jesus' baptism.

But What Is Baptism? And How did it originate? And how important is it? All of these are crucially important questions that are relevant not only for this morning but every day. And they are questions I get asked all the time. When I'm asked about baptism in those ways, I usually try to answer by making what I hope will be cogent references to the history and practice and symbolism of baptism in Christian art:

- Baptism is a practice that Jesus' enacted and therefore we do too, following his example.
- Baptism is the manner by which the gospel writers portray Jesus' enrollment in the story of God's saving grace that began with Adam, proceeded through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, continued with David and all the prophets.
- Baptism has a background, possibly connected to the ritual cleansing that adherents of Judaism followed fairly fastidiously. Travelers to Jerusalem will see, for example, the "mikvahs" that stand at the northwest corner of the Temple mount. Before one could enter into the temple itself above a seemingly endless flight of stairs, one had to be ritually cleaned. (We see some of this emphasis on being cleansed when we read the apostle Paul and he reminds us in the 21st century about how our sins have been cleansed from our character and deleted from our destiny.
- Baptism is that traditional manner by which believers become publicly known as believers in the midst of a caring community. In a river, or a font or a baptistry – there are as many ways of being baptized as there are Christian denominations.

But rather than superimpose those historical and traditionally theological interpretations to baptism, I've been wrestling with how I might describe and explain baptism to a person who had never picked up a Bible or entered a church

or seen any video or book about the Christian faith and what it believes and practices. And I've come up with a new definition for baptism. Hopefully this will not be perceived as a "watered-down" (excuse the pun!) version of what Baptism is all about but rather a contemporizing of it.

Baptism, a new definition: The Supreme Gift of a Warm Welcome

What is baptism? Simply put, baptism is the supreme gift of a warm welcome. It is by way of this warm welcome that people are enfolded into the Christian way. It is by this welcome that we are energized and glad to be at church. It is by virtue of this glad welcome that we have the spirit to endure rough times and exult in the good.

Now the supreme gift of a warm welcome in Jesus' name has three distinct empowering, life-transforming aspects to it:

(1) You are not alone.

Stephen King is a writer of extreme power, as you know. But beyond all of his horror-saturated tales, he's a good thinker and a good teacher about writing and words. Now Stephen King has identified the most heinous word in the English lexicon. *"Alone. Yes, that's the key word, the most awful word in the English tongue. Murder doesn't hold a candle to it and hell is only a poor synonym."*

But – good news! – you are not alone because the lightness is with you. That's the way Jake Ohle puts it. Jake is a poet of extraordinary power and flair. And he's only nine years old. You won't find a grandmother of a poet prouder than Marj Palmer is of Jake. Neither will you find a poet's mother prouder than Katie Ohle. I was graced recently to see Jake's poem on Marj's living room wall. Then, when Jake and Katie were taking care of Marj at St. Joseph Hospital after her recent surgery, Jake wrote it out for me – by memory! Right there in Marj's room #537!

Jake's poem goes like this:

You can see it up and you can see it down.

You can see it square and you can see it round.

You can see it all around.

It's the lightness that you see in a soccer field.

It's the lightness keeping you from the battlefield.

It's the lightness all around the solar system.

It's the lightness that makes you want to be like him.

It's the lightness of amazing grace.

It's the lightness for heaven's sake.

**It's the lightness like the speed of light.
It's the lightness that's extremely bright.
It's the lightness of God.**

It's the lightness, all right, that attends us and keeps us company no matter our circumstances or situations. It's the lightness that shows us we're not alone. You will never be abandoned or neglected or left for nothing. Though you may feel like you're hanging out there all by yourself, God is still with you. The lightness of God is with you, everywhere you are, everywhere you go. God's supreme gift of a warm welcome is to remind you that you need never despair of having to make it "all by your lonesome," as we used to say in Texas.

(2) You are precious to God.

Secondly the supreme gift of a warm welcome conveys to you that you are precious to God. This why I believe Matthew's gospel has Jesus commissioning his disciples to go and make disciples of everyone and baptize them "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." To baptize in that manner is parallel to the way Jesus was baptized and similar to the blessing Jesus received on the day his cousin John immersed him in the river Jordan: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." You are precious to God. No matter how the world has treated you - good or ill - no matter how your life journey has gone - foul or fair - no matter what your estimation of your own value is - undervalued or overvalued - you are precious to God.

Being baptized empowers you to recall the precious character you possess in God's eyes. Whenever Martin Luther was struggling to be faithful to the gospel while at the same time maintaining his integrity about how the church needed to change, he would occasionally grow despondent. Whenever the dark clouds of despondency would descend upon him, he would repeat to himself and write two words : *Baptizatus Sum*. I am baptized. Baptism, as a symbol of the supreme gift of the warm welcome God desires to give each and every one of us, reminds us that we are precious to God, forever.

(3) You are part of grand endeavor.

To experience the supreme gift of a warm welcome - down to the deepest recesses of your being - is to know that you have become a part of grand endeavor. And that grand endeavor is rather simple and straightforward. To receive the supreme gift of a warm welcome from God, and to have a reminder of that gift by way of the practice of baptism, is to know that you have come to God's grace and that you have been welcomed into a home that will never evict you. To be part of God's grand movement of grace in the world is to know - in a profoundly irrefutable sense that you are home.

In Will Campbell's novel, *The Glad River*, Doops Momber, Kingston Smiley, and Fordache Arceneau become friends while serving together in the U.S. Army. Doops is a distinctively different kind of individual, growing up in Mississippi but never having been baptized. He said he never found any "real Baptists" who could do a proper baptism of him, plus he didn't believe. In time Doops comes to believe. Doops knows who he is and whose he is. Fordache, whom Doops and Kingston call "Model T" is accused and convicted of a murder he did not commit. But his defense is rather lame, and he doesn't have much recourse for appeals. So there comes a time for him to be executed. But before that happens, Doops suddenly is converted to faith and desires to have Model to baptize him in the prison where he's being held. So there the three friends gather, in Model T's death row cell, along with the judge in whose court the case was tried, plus the sheriff, plus the attorney who prosecuted Model T's case. The judge offers to move the baptism to a more spacious room, but Model T won't have it. "Holy things ought to be done at home," he says. "This [death row cell] has been my home for a long time.... Holy things ought to be done at home." (*The Glad River*, p. 277.)

A warm welcome in general and the specific warm welcome of becoming part of a community of faith provides you with a sense of at-home-ness where holy things are done: connecting with others in fellowship, care, and sharing both your joys and your sorrows, caring for others both near and far, with compassion and imagination, reconnecting with the human family and returning to your best self.

And one other thing. By receiving the supreme gift of God's warm welcome, you will be emboldened, made stronger and unafraid.

There's a poster on a wall at the offices of Facebook that poses one of those generative questions for the ages: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

What would you do if...

Our answers to such a question are the stuff of which greatness is made. By precept and practice, Jesus offered his life and public ministry as a model for fulfilling our answers to such a question. And the first thing he did in a public way, according to three of the gospel accounts, was to be baptized.

How do you respond to such a question? Please know that the supreme gift of a warm welcome is always available to you here at Community. Also your friends can feel comforted and empowered as they know they, too, have a place that will help them answer such a question with ease and confidence. To live unafraid, unfettered by fear, is the ultimate goal of baptism, and the premier gift of faith in general, and the sine qua non of the Christian way of life.

You are not alone.

You are precious.
You are part of grand endeavor.

You are welcome. You are welcome. You are welcome at Community Christian Church. You are welcome in God's heart of grace. Not just for a day, but forever and ever and ever and ever. AMEN.