

“Remembering Why We Baptize”
Luke 3:15-22

“Let us remember with joy our own baptism as we celebrate this sacrament.”

Those words are part of every baptism at DPC. Whether the soon-to-be-recipient of water is an infant or teenager or adult, that phrase marks the conclusion to the pastor’s opening words and is then followed with an introduction of the baptismal candidate by the Ruling Elder sponsor. It is part of our liturgy, but is meant to be much more than simply tradition as that statement invites all who are present to recall the moment of their baptism as they witness the latest one.

Now clearly, if you received those waters as an infant or child—and there have been 165 of those here where I have been the officiant--any remembrance of the day will come from a faded photograph or the memories of your parents. If it occurred when you were a teenager, and there have been eleven of those during my pastorate, the recall would certainly be better and perhaps bring back how nervous you were in the moment. And if it happened when you were an adult, and during the time I have served at DPC there have been nine such occasions with the oldest person being 68 years old at the time, the remembrance is clearer still. Certainly, the vast majority of you were baptized by someone other than me, yet to all in this room or watching online we will say “Let us remember with joy our own baptism as we celebrate this sacrament.”

On this morning when we baptize again, I’d like for us to engage in such pondering ahead of time by focusing on a particular part of the remembrance; namely why it is that we baptize at all? Why do parents present a child to receive that sacrament? Why do teenagers take that step as part of confirmation? Why does an adult choose to receive the waters of baptism? The answers will vary, of course, and if we’re honest could include the telling of some infants receiving the sacrament because a spouse or in-laws insisted on it. Some teens might admit they were baptized only because it was required to join the church and some adults could acknowledge that took that step because they could not present their child for baptism until they were baptized first. Certainly, many, many baptisms occur because of the deep significance of that step for the recipient or their child, but human motivations, even in the most spiritual of actions, can be mixed. Thus, part of our remembrance on this day is to recall why it occurred.

Yet while each of you begin such reflection, I’d like to consider the larger question of why the church baptizes. I do so because I suspect such collective pondering can provide insight into your own story and fill in some gaps as to the church’s practice. So, why do we baptize?

The most basic answer is because Jesus commanded it. In his parting words, a moment referred to as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19f), Jesus says to the remaining apostles “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” From that instant forward, the church has baptized. Sometimes by immersion, sometimes by sprinkling, sometimes in a lake or river and sometimes with a baptismal pool or font. The particulars vary as to who can baptize or receive the waters and whether someone can be baptized more than once, but every group that follows Jesus Christ baptizes. It’s been so from the start. Yet even with that shared point of origin; there is another reason we take that step; a detail I heard named in Luke’s telling of Jesus’ baptism.

The passage we read opens by recalling how John the Baptist offered a baptism of repentance leading some to wonder if he was the long-awaited Messiah. In our reading, John clearly seeks to clear up any confusion. “I baptize you with water,” he says “but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” A few verses later, the baptism of Jesus is described without

mentioning John's name, depicting the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven that says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

In between that powerful word from God and John's clarification, Luke offers a detail that is out of sequence. "But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by [John] because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison." The Herod named is not the same one who reigned at the time of Jesus' birth, but his son Herod Antipas who oversaw the region of Galilee. Other gospels tell of his shameful behavior which resulted in John's rebuke and ultimately led to the Baptizer's death yet only Luke has the arrest happen before Jesus comes to the Jordan River.

The suggested reading for today from the common lectionary—the ecumenical resource that recommends Biblical passages for each Sunday of the year—skips over the verses about John's arrest, likely because it is hard to explain. Yet I chose to include it in even with his historical challenges, because it says something about why we baptize.

For like John, you and I live in a world that still resists the teachings of Jesus. Like the Baptizer, you and I dwell in a culture that would have us silenced by earthly powers. Like the one who prepared the way for Jesus' ministry, we exist in an era where others spew hatred and don't want anyone calling them out for it. The choice to baptize, though, tells a different story.

In the book *Wholehearted Faith*, published two years after her untimely death at age 37, Rachel Held Evans describes the struggle with her fundamentalist upbringing and how her faith changed. In particular, she tells in her typical candor and skill about the sense of judgment that characterized the first half of her life before coming to understand fully that the Christian faith is to be rooted in and reflective of God's love. It all comes together when she talks about baptism.

"I am a Christian because my baptism has declared that I am a beloved child of God. There is no failure, no sin, no accomplishment, no success that can change that. In a culture that prizes independence and individualism, Christianity offers an uncomfortable but necessary and insoluble interdependence. The church—by which I mean not just the congregation into which I was baptized or the one that I now call home but rather the universal church that shares one baptism—is a whole network of people spanning two thousand years and every continent and culture on the globe, who love and pray and believe on one another's behalf...

"For me, the strange and ancient ritual of baptism reveals something at the heart of Christian identity. First and foremost, we are beloved children of God, blessed by layer upon layer of love. Wherever my child's faith and lives may take them—even if it's away from the tradition in which we are raising them—they will know that the act of baptism took place because they were, perhaps clumsily and undoubtedly imperfectly, loved. It was one way in which we, as parents, said to our children, 'You are my child, in whom I am well pleased.' It was one way in which we, as parents, recognized that God has said and, we hope, will say of us, 'You are my child, the beloved; with you, I am well pleased.'

"Baptism, like communion and confession and the creeds, reminds us that we cannot be Christians on our own. We belong to a community even larger than the one gathered around those rickety folding tables in the fellowship hall, weighed down with Jell-O molds and deviled eggs. It's a family of faith bound together by the same Holy Spirit through whom Christ was conceived and the same Holy Spirit who descended from the heavens like a dove." (Evans, Rachel Held *Wholehearted Faith*. New York: Harper One, 2021, pp 107-108.)

Thus on a morning when we again baptize may it also be a time when we recall and give thanks for the love of one who spoke from the heavens long ago. For in doing so, truly we will remember with joy our own baptism as we celebrate once more this sacrament.