

2022 01 16 – Living Water

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (The Inclusive Bible)

Last year I had the privilege of officiating at six baptisms: 1 adult, 2 infants and 3 toddlers. Some of those baptisms had been scheduled to take place the year before, but COVID-19 got in the way. We were all waiting for the pandemic to be over and then, eventually, it didn't make sense to wait any more. You may recall, that these six baptisms all happened a little differently than normal. The ones that took place in-person required masking and distancing for safety. The other two happened online, in a Zoom worship service. But no matter how or where each baptism was performed, there was always at least one element that remained the same.

Water, there is always water. When we celebrate baptism in the sanctuary, we use the font. It is a large, carved wooden piece of furniture with a basin for water at the top. Some churches have stone fonts, others have pools of water, and some still baptize outside in a river or spring. The location of the baptism and the container for the water are not what is important.

In fact, the very first baptism that I performed took place in a kitchen. I was baptizing Annie, an elderly woman who could no longer get up the stairs into the church building. So we gathered around her kitchen table: Annie, her seven adult children and me, her student minister. I had with me a small pitcher of water and a bowl. I prayed over the water, (*pick up water and pitcher*) poured it into

the bowl and then performed the act of baptism. It was incredibly sacred moment.

At First United, the water is often poured by children. We all watch with bated breath as they lift the heavy glass pitcher and pour the water into the bowl, sometimes with small trickles, other times with large splashes. This past year we watched as family members: parents, cousins, siblings and even an adult son poured the baptismal waters.

Water is the most important, the central symbol in the sacrament of baptism. We use water because that's what John, the baptizer, used 2000 years ago. John lived in a desert and used the water that was available to him, the water of the Jordan River. The people of Judea came to the river to be baptized by John.

One day, Jesus also appeared at the river. The other gospels explicitly state that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan. They even talk about Jesus "coming up out the water" after being submerged in the act of a full body baptism. He would have been soaked. Just imagine water dripping off his long hair, his nose, his beard and his clothes. Luke is a little more subtle in his description of that moment. He just wrote, "When all the people were baptized, Jesus also came to be baptized."

One might ask, why on earth did Jesus need to be baptized? Why did he need to experience the waters of baptism? Even more relevant, why do we need to be

baptized? What does the act actually mean? What does all that water symbolize?

You may remember that each time we gather around the font, I say these words:

The sacrament of baptism
proclaims and celebrates the grace of God.
By water and the Spirit,
we are called, claimed, and commissioned;

We are called God's own,
welcomed as children of God.

Through our baptism, we are called. This is the first and foremost reason for baptism. It is a celebration of life itself. It is a celebration of God's grace. The author of the gospel of Luke may have left out the watery part of Jesus' baptism, but he didn't leave out this part. He wrote,

And while Jesus was praying, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favour rests."

Water, like the dove, is a symbol of the Spirit. When we are baptized the water descends on us, touches our skin and we are reminded that we are beloved children of God. It is a recognition that each one of us, by the very act of our birth, our being, is loved unconditionally.

Then, I say,

We are claimed by Christ,
united with Christ,
united with one another and the Christian community
of every time and place.

Through our baptism, we are claimed. This is the second reason to be baptized. When that blessed water touches our body we become a part of the church, a part of the people who call themselves followers of Jesus. At the time of our baptism promises are made. When we are infants they are made by our parents, but later, when we are confirmed, we make those promises for ourselves and we become full members of a church community.

Baptism is about belonging. It is about joining a nurturing community where we have the opportunity to grow in our faith and to deepen our connection with the Sacred. During our baptism, promises are also made by the people of the church. The members of the congregation promise to support us with “constant love, wholesome example, Christian teaching, and faithful prayer.”

Water is a symbol of healing, nurturing, and cleansing. Think about the healing power of a hot shower or the soothing nature of a cold, wet compress on a feverish forehead. To me, that’s what John means when he talks about being baptized in Holy Spirit and fire. When we know that we are loved, when we have the support of family and community, then we can do the hard work of healing, of letting go of those parts of ourselves that are holding us back, those parts of our being that are keeping us from discovering our true selves. Baptism is about accepting the grace of God into our lives and allowing it to change us.

Finally,

We are commissioned to Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice,
and strengthened by the Holy Spirit
for the work of the church in the world.

Through our baptism, we are given a commission. This is especially true for adult baptisms. In the United Church, this part of our baptism is emphasized more deeply when we are confirmed as teenagers or adults. Jesus was baptized at the beginning of his ministry. For him it was a commissioning into a new profession, a new way of being in the world. He was being called to share God's reign of love, God's promise of justice and peace. He was beginning a new journey in his life.

Water is a symbol of new life. Every time we remember our baptism, every time we are part of a baptism in our worship, it is another opportunity for us to start anew. It is another opportunity for us to be re-commissioned to our own work in the church and in our community. It is an opportunity for us to ask ourselves, "What is God calling me to do in this time and in this place?"

Baptism is a sacrament in which we are called, claimed and commissioned. When that water is poured into the font (*pour again*), then we are reminded that the living water of the Holy Spirit is pouring into us every moment of every day. We are reminded that we are loved, that we are not alone and that we have a role to play in the creation of God's reign of peace and justice on this earth. May it be so. Amen.