

Chosen and Marked by Love
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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Today is Baptism of Christ Sunday and the scripture you just heard Yolanda read is all about Jesus getting baptized, so I want to share an interesting baptism story with you. When I was in fourth grade my best friend went to a nondenominational mega-church in our hometown. My family had our UCC church we belonged to, but I would occasionally go to church with my friend. One summer she invited me to her church's summer camp, and I was excited to go.

As I was packing, our minister's wife was at our house having tea with my mom, so I spoke to her about camp and she asked to see the packet of information. She read the materials and said, "Lauren, these camp counselors will teach you Bible stories differently than you learn them at Trinity, just be aware of this. Most importantly, don't let them baptize you. You've already been baptized and God was present, don't let them baptize you again."

I wondered why anyone would try to baptize me again, but I kept her advice in the back of my mind. On the second day of camp, one of the counselors offered communion to anyone who had been baptized. I got up to receive communion and was asked when I was baptized, so I related that it happened at my church when I was a baby. The counselor replied, "Well your baptism doesn't count, you should get baptized again. But I'll let you take communion anyway." Remember I was in fourth grade, so I asked why my baptism didn't count and he said that God only approves of Believer's Baptism. The proper way to get baptized, he told me, is like Jesus was by John—wading into water when you're old enough to know what it means and you have fully accepted Jesus Christ into your heart. I got defensive, saying that in the United Church of Christ we baptize babies and I think God is fine with that. And you're just dumb if you don't agree. I really said that, I was mad.

Church camp ended by having anyone who wanted to be baptized come forward on the last day, wade into the lake, and be immersed in the water. I was not among those kids. When I came back to church and told my minister and his wife what happened, they were proud of me, not for calling the camp counselor dumb, but for believing that my baptism was perfectly valid in the eyes of God the first time around.

Truth be told, I think about this childhood experience every Baptism of Christ Sunday, and it still makes me mad. Because that counselor was so narrow-minded and missed the point of Jesus' Baptism entirely. When Jesus goes to the Jordan River to get baptized, it marks the beginning of his ministry. When he comes out of those waters something remarkable happens. Jesus either heard or felt these words from God, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."^[1] The Message translation may be even more poignant, "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life."^[2]

Jesus is about to embark on his three year journey of highs and lows, conflicts and triumphs, and a whole lot of adversity as he attempts to teach people that they are to love God and love their neighbors in order to create the Kingdom of God on earth now. Today's story shows a picture of God affirming Jesus, loving Jesus, calling Jesus the pride of God's life. It's a moment of blessing, that's the deeper meaning of the story. And I believe that exactly how it happened pales in comparison to what it ultimately means.

When we get so obsessive about the perfect way to do things, sometimes the deeper meanings get lost. My Systematics Theology professor once told our class that the best way to think about Christian history and this inclination we seem to have is to picture an hourglass. In the beginning of the Jesus Movement, there was a great deal of diversity, different beliefs and

practices and even different Gospels wherever the faith spread. The way Christians practiced their faith and the beliefs they held in Antioch were often different than Corinth or Rome or Ephesus or Pergamum, you get the idea.

Over time, with all those Church Councils and creeds and the Christian canon solidified, and this once small Movement becoming powerful and mighty under Emperor Constantine, we have our hourglass coming in and being restricted. At that time in the history of our faith, it was all about orthodoxy. If you didn't believe this doctrine or you didn't believe that doctrine, you were a heretic.

The irony is that theology requires imagination in speaking about things that are beyond our own experience and understanding. (It's not like we can put God under a microscope and study God the way we can other subjects. It's not like we can explore Jesus' DNA in order to determine his genetic make-up.) And yet, theology as humanity trying to work out what this all means got lost in the middle of that hourglass. We fought over what were orthodox beliefs about God and Jesus and the Church.

With the Reformation and now in our own time, our hourglass is slowly but surely spreading out again, as diversity in religious beliefs and practices are accepted (in many circles, not all) and even celebrated. I alluded to this in last week's sermon, the difference between faith and belief and why our United Church of Christ has a Statement of Faith as opposed to several creeds we have to adhere to in order to be part of this denomination.

Now we don't just have Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, we diversify our categories even more. We have all our denominations in addition to terms like Mainline Protestants, Progressive Christians, Evangelical Christians, Nondenominational Christians, Emerging and Emergent Christians—and there's a difference. We have folks who identify as PentoBaptists, both Baptists and Pentecostals. We have MethoBaptists, Methodists and Baptists, you get the idea. I could go on and on with this, but the point is that diversity in religious beliefs and practices are here once more.

This is a very simplified explanation of thousands of years of Church History and practice, but I think this is all exciting! Instead of the doom and gloom predictions of what will happen to Mainline Protestant denominations, including ours, in the midst of all these changes—I think we have the chance now to throw some things up in the air and see what really matters to us. We have the opportunity to figure out who we are now in this generation. In our UCC language, God is Still Speaking! It's up to us to discern where God is leading us.

Because the thing is, I don't think Jesus went to John to get baptized knowing exactly how his ministry was going to go. God's divine affirmation and pep talk indicate to me that God was trying to make sure Jesus knew he was loved and that God would be with him at all times, but it wasn't going to be easy. God does this for us too. When each one of us gets baptized, it's an outward and visible sign of God's love. The whole congregation takes vows that we will walk beside you and/or your child as we live out our faiths together at Pilgrim Church.

In reflecting on God walking beside us and outwardly loving us in the practice of baptism UCC Minister Donna Schaper related that her brother called her once and asked for his baptismal robe that hung in her house for decades. She asked why, all his children were grown and he was now in his 50s. Her little brother responded, "I want to remember that I was presented to God and that God took me in."^[3]

In some ways, we get to remember our presentations to God every time we witness a baptism. We get to declare the words Jesus once heard—you are our son and you are our daughter "chosen and marked by God's love, pride of our lives."^[4] And it doesn't matter how that

baptism happened or at what age, the love of God is there. This is what we witness in each and every baptism we see at Pilgrim Church. This is what we witness when we go back and look at the Baptism of Christ. And these are words to live by in our daily lives.

What if we were this affirming to one another—you are my mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband, wife, friend whomever—chosen and marked by God's love, pride of my life. Well maybe that would be a strange thing to say, but the sentiment behind these words is something to remember, it's something that can change the way we treat one another. We don't know what this year will bring our way, we can't predict the future. But with God by our sides and this faith community walking beside us, we certainly will not be lost and alone in this sometimes crazy world. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

[1] Luke 3:22, NRSV

[2] Luke 3:22, The Message

[3] Donna Schaper, "I Am Baptized" in *The Best of the Stillspeaking Daily Devotionals*, 13.

[4] Luke 3:22, The Message.