

The Sacrament of Belonging
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 14, 2007

A prominent attorney was rushing through Chicago's O'Hare Airport to make a connecting flight at another terminal. A group of children touring the airport suddenly blocked his way. The man fussed and fumed as he tried to find his way through and around the children. All at once his frenzied efforts were halted by one of the children, a boy with blonde hair and wide, blue eyes, who wrapped his arms around the attorney's leg, squeezed tightly and looked up into the man's face, asking, "Who do you belong to, Mister? Can I go with you?"

Retelling the experience, the attorney confessed, "My heart melted. It had been some years since I had felt a child's arms around my leg. I put my hand on his head, tousled his hair, and told him I wished he could go with me. Then I noticed that he and the other children wore identical t-shirts with the name of a children's home on them—I guessed it was an orphanage. When I was aboard my flight and headed home, the little guy's question would not go away. I began to ask myself, 'To whom do I belong? Do I belong to my profession, my clients, my social status, my investments, to everything but to those who love me, or to God who once was real to me.'"¹

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. We all need to have a place where we feel at home. We need to be connected in a significant way to others. We need to fit in. We need to belong.

For the Christian church, baptism is the means by which we are assured that we belong. In our baptism we receive the blessing which Jesus received at his baptism, "You are God's beloved child." Baptism is a tangible sign of our identity as children of God. We are chosen as God's beloved and invited to join in the family of faith. Baptism is our initiation into the community of God's people. We are incorporated into the church, a place of belonging and nurture, a place where we are loved and strengthened.

One of the churches I served in Sunnyvale is jointly owned by Trinity United Methodist Church and St. John's Lutheran Church. They share the same worship space. The Methodists worship at 9:30; the Lutherans at 11:00. A noticeable difference in this setting is that the baptism font is at the back of the sanctuary, close to the entrance. When I inquired, I learned that the Lutherans set the baptismal font at the entrance to the church because baptism is the act of initiation into the church. It is the beginning, the threshold, the doorway to the journey of faith. United Methodists place the

baptismal font in the main part of the sanctuary, near the altar, to symbolize our inclusion in the family of God. We draw near to God in baptism, we are embraced by God and belong to God. Both are appropriate understandings of baptism. The symbolic placement of the font reinforces the various meanings of baptism as entrance into the church and inclusion in the family of God.

This is why baptisms take place when the community of faith is gathered for worship. The people of God are present to welcome the new member into the family of faith, to confirm that he or she indeed belongs and is one of us. We embody Christ's spirit of acceptance and unconditional love. The community surrounds the one being baptized and represents the nurturing love of God. We stand with one another as we journey into the fullness of the Christian life and faith. Occasionally people outside the church will call to request a baptism at home or at a private service in the sanctuary. We don't offer baptisms outside the gathered Body of Christ; a private ceremony contradicts the very meaning of the sacrament. The family of God needs to be present to welcome its newest member and to give that person a sense of belonging.

There are no entrance fees or admission price or membership dues required. The gift of belonging is a free gift of God. God chooses us without prerequisites and God takes the initiative in granting grace. That is why we baptize infants – because nothing is required of us. Infant baptism symbolizes our smallness and our lack of merit, and yet the largeness of God's grace to include us all in God's care.

Baptism is the sacrament of belonging. It is the mystery whereby we become a part of God's people. It is a holy moment when we witness to our God-given worth and claim our potential as children of God. It is a gift of identity as God's Beloved, as God's Chosen One. Baptism is the threshold into the community of faith, a place of belonging and nurture, a place of strength and love.

A certain pastor in the Midwest tells of a time when a woman named Mildred, who always sat in the very last pew, came to him after worship one Sunday. She explained that her daughter, Tina, had just had a baby and thought it should be baptized. The pastor suggested that Tina and her husband call to discuss it. Mildred faltered, "Tina's got no husband; she's just 18, and she was confirmed in this church four years ago. Then she started to see this boy who was out of school..." and the story tumbled out.

The pastor agreed to baptize the child. It was scheduled for the last Sunday in Advent, when the church was full. Tina came down the aisle, nervous and shaking, holding one-month-old Jimmy. She was so young, so

alone, reminding the pastor of another baby boy born long ago into difficult circumstances, a boy whose mother had also been unwed.

It was the tradition of the baptismal ritual for the question to be asked, “Who stands with this child?” Usually the family stood. This time when the question was asked, the child’s grandmother had to be coaxed to stand. The pastor was about to continue the service when he became aware of movement in the pews. He looked up and saw that the most influential church member and community leader was standing, along with his wife. Then a couple others stood. Then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher, and a new couple in the church, and soon the whole church stood up with little Jimmy. His mother was crying as the scripture was read, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God....There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear.” The pastor said, “In that baptism, those words came alive; they were clothed with God’s love and everybody felt it.”²

Jimmy and his mother, Tina, were offered a sense of belonging. The story points toward a second meaning of baptism. It is the sacrament of vocation. Having received the blessing of belonging, we are consecrated for ministry. We are called to mission and service. The community to which we belong not only welcomes us, but also sends us out to care for others and to take the risk of loving. We are commissioned to stand with others so that they know that they, too, belong to God.

We are blessed to be a blessing. We are chosen to be of service. We are called to open ourselves to new life, to fresh possibilities for the future, to a meaningful purpose for living. We are claimed to be part of Christ’s ongoing life in the world.

I have in my possession two very nice certificates which are my credentials as a deacon and elder in the United Methodist Church. They were given to me when Bishop Leontine Kelly and Bishop Melvin Talbert laid hands upon me and ordained me to the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. They are very important documents which I hold with great humility and honor. There is another certificate which in some ways is a more prized possession. It is a simpler, smaller certificate of baptism dated seven months after my birth, from Trinity Methodist Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. That baptismal certificate signifies my membership in the family of faith and my commission as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the most important credential we can have, for it marks our vocation to continue the ministry of Jesus on earth in this time and this place.

Baptism is the sacrament of belonging. Baptism is the sacrament of vocation. Too frequently the ways of the world batter our spirits and leave

us bruised. Hurtful words spoken in the past have wounded our psyches. We are broken people. Today we are invited to place our brokenness in the baptismal waters and reclaim our identity as God's beloved. We are remembering our baptism and recovering our sacred worth in God's sight. Baptism is a one-time sacrament, but it is vital and healing that we remember our baptism and affirm its meaning in our lives. As we annually remember Jesus' baptism, so we also remember our own baptisms.

Baptism is the gift assuring us that we belong, we belong to God and to the community of faith. Baptism is a vocation, a calling, for we are blessed to be a blessing, we are chosen for service. Thanks be to God for the refreshing, life-renewing waters of baptism.

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