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Plymouth Congregational UCC

The Baptized Life
Matthew 3:13-17

*I baptize you in the name of God the father,
whose love makes life possible;
in the name of Jesus Christ,
who walked among us and shared our common life;
and in the name of the Holy Spirit,
who empowers and embraces us:
One God and mother of us all.*

How many times have you heard those words spoken in this sanctuary?

These are the words we at Plymouth use to baptize.

Written by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin,

these words are powerful, invoking a tradition so old that our very bodies – bone and breath – respond;
and yet these words lift up the truth that God is ever new, known to us in ever expanding ways.

Baptism is a rite older than Christianity, as evidenced by this morning's reading from Matthew.

John was a baptizer within his Jewish heritage;

and Jesus, beginning the public life of his ministry, recognized the ritual's power –
both for the community as for his personal spiritual path.

In churches today, baptism can be so familiar and yet somewhat mysterious.

Why did that person or that parent choose baptism at this time?

Why did they choose that godparent or that sponsor or none at all?

Why did she sprinkle the water, or pour it out, or fully immerse him in a pool?

While every Christian community enacts the rite differently, we recognize only *one* baptism.

It's like saying: once you're a part of this family; you can't claim you're not related –
no matter how you feel about that sister or those nephews.

We're family.

One reflection on the UCC website states it this way:

“We believe that all of the baptized ‘belong body and soul to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.’

No matter who – no matter what – no matter where we are on life's journey ...

we all belong to God and to one worldwide community of faith.

All persons baptized – past present and future – are connected to each other and to God
through the sacrament of baptism.

We baptize during worship when the community is present

because baptism includes the community's

promise of ‘love, support and care’ for the baptized –

and we promise that we won't take it back –

no matter where your journey leads you”.

So basically, we're in.

And that can be a complex statement.

Because when we are in the community, we are called – not only to ‘love, support and care’ for one another –
but to hold the community and the individuals in it to accountability.

Did you know we were making such a loaded choice!

Furthermore, this note on baptism's inclusivity ("no matter who, no matter what") is not uniquely UCC.

Rather, we find the mandate within scripture, in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

"²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise".

Again, we're family.

A complex community – which, at Plymouth, always includes “friends of the family” who walk with us and share the journey of faith. Because not everyone wants to take that particular step, for any number of reasons.

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Like our understandings of God, our theology of baptism has transformed over the centuries. I give thanks for one change in particular, although it's past continues to hold sway in many people's emotional connection to baptism.

I'm thinking of some of the most poignant memories I have of my time as a hospital chaplain when families lost a newborn child to death.

I can't recall the number of “emergency baptisms” I performed for fearful loved ones who had been convinced that their innocent child could not enter heaven without that blessing.

This is *not* a part of our church's belief.

But if baptism isn't a magic formula that secures our salvation, what *is* the purpose of our sacrament?

At the beginning of every baptism we celebrate, Hal or I state these words:

“Baptism is one of the sacraments observed in our churches.

It is a symbol of the grace through which life comes to us.

It is a vehicle through which God expresses unconditional love for humanity”.

The intent of these words is spoken different ways in different places.

One UCC brochure explains it this way:

“The sacrament of baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God.

Through baptism a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ.

In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness,
the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the
call to be God's people always”.

Listen to that last again:

“...God works in us THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS,

THE RENEWAL OF THE SPIRIT,

AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE CALL TO BE GOD'S PEOPLE ALWAYS”.

Is this transformative power what you think about when you participate, as a member of Christ's church, in another person's baptism?

When we sit in the pews,

listening to the words spoken,

watching a parent hold his child or

an adult standing nervously before us;

when we witness the water

forming the sign of the cross on her forehead three times –

one for each of aspects of the Trinity –

do you remember the transforming grace of God in your life?

I wonder if it was on Jesus' mind as he stepped into the waters of the Jordan to stand before his cousin John?

The power of forgiveness...

The renewal of the spirit...

The knowledge of the call to be God's own always...

Or if he recognized it as the Holy Spirit became visible in a descending dove;

or when God's love spoke in his heart: "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased".

If our Gospel stories have any truth in them, it is that they reveal Jesus' life as having exemplified these qualities – whether or not he consciously considered them at his baptism.

And *our* baptism is *in* him;

into the life of Christ;

into his universal Church.

Our baptisms are a call to be like the Christ – and thus we are given a part in Christ's ministry:

to know transformation in the power of forgiveness;

to continually be transformed by renewal of the spirit;

to transform the world through knowledge of God's call.

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For every person who comes to ask me about baptism – either for himself or his child – I return the question:

Why do you want to be baptized?

What does that mean to you?

How will it transform your life?

During our baptisms here at Plymouth, a person is publicly asked to make a covenant with Christ.

If the person baptized is too young to make the promise for herself, then parents make that covenant.

And in that sacred space of time, we remind each person – ourselves included (perhaps ourselves especially, as persons who've already promised to live into our baptisms) – we remind each other that while

“baptism is a means of grace... God's grace is most often apparent through the

things and people of this world” (remember Jesus' actions in care and compassion for others).

And so we *recommit* ourselves in the sacrament, saying:

“It is your responsibility, therefore, to become *continuing* vehicles of God's grace”,

confessing “faith in Jesus of Nazareth as an image of human wholeness and human responsibility”.

Each of us, as an acknowledgment of our baptism into Christ's family, publicly accepts our “responsibility as vehicles of God's grace”:

a responsibility to continually grow through faith, study, worship, service and experience.

Through this sacrament, we have chosen a lifelong commitment to spiritual transformation.

That's a huge commitment, which never ends.

So big, in fact, that it makes me wonder:

For those of you who were baptized as a child: would you today choose to be baptized?

And if you have never yourself participated in the sacrament, what does it mean to you?

Would any of you knowingly – at this point in your life – make that covenant?

Would you choose, again or for the first time, to become a part of this

loving, challenging, hopeful, transforming, frustrating,

inspirational, mistake-making, Christ-following

family called Christianity?

Why? Or why not?

In 2007 Plymouth celebrated 13 baptisms.

That's 13 new members of our worldwide community to whom each of us has made this promise:

*As fellow members with you in the community of faith,  
we join in the covenant that you acknowledge this day.*

*We receive you as a new person in Christ.*

*We offer our understanding and support as you explore life.*

*We enfold you in our love, seeking together to grow in  
wisdom and stature and in favor with God and all people.*

We have to listen to, think about, and mean these words we speak each time we make our covenant.

*This* is what baptism means.

It is a promise to never stop growing,

to never stop caring,

to never stop learning what it means to be

transformed by forgiveness,

renewed in the spirit,

and called by God as her very own...always.

May we all rise to new life through transforming waters,

through the Holy Spirit's movement,

through our following of Christ's call in our lives.

Amen.