

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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“God, Baptism, and Allowing Mystery”

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My 6th grade confirmation teacher was Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker was seminary trained but had never continued on to become ordained. The church we attended asked Mr. Parker to teach the 6th grade Confirmation program because they knew 6th graders had a lot of questions, like zillions of questions, and they figured since he had seminary training Mr. Parker would be a good person to help the young people struggle with all those questions.

Mr. and Mrs. Parker were very good friends with our family. Their daughter Meg was a year ahead of me in school and a good friend, their son Jim was a year or two younger than my older brother and they had lots of common interests. They lived about 2 blocks away from us and we attended school together, as well as church. I was really excited to get into Mr. Parker’s class because, as a 6th grader, I had lots of questions about the bible, faith, God, Jesus and the Church.

But one thing Mr. Parker did as the teacher of that class deeply frustrated me. He would teach us about the Trinity and say, “God is three in one and one in three,” and when we asked him how that could be, he just said, no one can fully explain it, it’s a mystery. He would talk about Communion and when we asked, how does God’s grace get into the bread and the grape juice, he would say, “we aren’t completely sure, it’s a mystery.” As a youngster wanting answers, that response felt flip, incomplete, like a cop out, at times I wondered if Mr. Parker really knew all that much?

Today we encounter Jesus being baptized and the longer I have been a pastor the more I realized that people in the church have lots of questions about baptism, like zillions. We want to know what happens when the church mixes water, Spirit, and Community and places that upon a person’s head.

We look at the story of Jesus’ baptism and we formulate questions that can never be answered. That frustrates us!

When we try to understand faith, occasionally we get answers, but more often we get more questions which draw us deeper into the heart and mystery of God. I just finished a book all about the importance of Curiosity, fostering a spirit in inquiry within ourselves. With Wikipedia as close as voice prompt of our smart speaker or device, we often settle for thinking we “know” about something after we have read a few lines about it on our device. But true curiosity drives us to dig deeper, and faith calls on us to cultivate curiosity.

As a Sacrament in the United Church of Christ and much of the Christian church, baptism inherently reflects the mystery of God and therefore evokes curiosity. A sacrament has been defined as an outward and visible sign, of an inward and invisible reality; the reality being the

Grace of God. That outward sign, created by our limited human imaginations, simply can never capture the fullness of God's Grace dwelling within a person.

This outward sign we call the sacrament of baptism may function in a number of different ways; some of them include that it names and claims a person as a child of God; the water may play the role of marking the person as a member of the body of Christ, or cleansing them for new life in Christ; the Holy Spirit acts to bestow upon the baptized the last name of God which is -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Finally, vows are taken to follow in the Christian way, participate in a local church and create a Christian home. But still more is going on.

In our UCC branch of the Christian tree the congregation plays a role. The congregation promises to serve as sort of "Spiritual mentors" to the person. They also promise to strengthen the church's education, worship, mission and hospitality so the baptized person continues to learn and grow no matter what age they are. A person is only baptized once in the UCC because through that baptism we trust the community of faith to be the family of God with the baptized person and remember who and whose they are as child of God and a brother or sister in Christ.

As we struggle to understand baptism, it helps to begin by claiming it is a mystery. No one fully understands the covenant and promises involved. The next step is to assure ourselves that our curiosity, our unanswered and even perhaps unanswerable questions are supposed to be a part of the journey. It is a journey of discovery, not a journey to an answer. We consider it part of following Jesus to continue wrestling with the numerous mysteries of God; all the while trusting God's love and forgiveness.

In conversation with Ann this week we concluded, "Baptism is a moment when eternity comes to us." Then we asked, "and who can understand that?" Baptism invites us into something tremendously magnificent and grand-- the heart of God. It potentially turns all of us into mystics, "persons who seek by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or absorption into God." Or, "One who believes in ways of knowing God other than intellectual." Paul writes about this mystery in I Corinthians 13, I'm taking this from The Message version, "We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly just as God knows us!"

I remember a mission trip to Jamaica years ago. I know doesn't sound like a mission trip, right? But it was. It really was. We worked long days beginning early in the morning through dinner each night providing a Vacation Bible School program for two Presbyterian Churches an hour outside of Montego Bay, in the rural foothills. For many residents of that region we were the first white people they had seen in person. The children touched our skin, our hair and looked into our eyes trying to figure out who are these strange white beasts.

The trip meant going to Jamaica in July and sleeping on cots in the pastor's house which cooled to the Mid 80's in temperature at night. Each morning we were awakened at 5 am

when the church ladies who had come to make breakfast had to clang pots and pans together loudly to scatter the rodents out of the kitchen. I told you it really was a mission trip.

On Sunday morning we attended a very lively worship at one of the churches. Much in an African American Tradition with lively singing, drums, guitar and electric piano, and lots of audience response, "Amen" and "Hallelujah"

At one point the Pastor called Ann forward, he said, today we have a baptism of one of our newborn babies and I have asked Rev. Ann to do the baptism. Ann went forward, said a few words, offered some prayers and placed her hand in the font, bringing up a little water three times she said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit." The pastor of the church stood in the background. The family had no idea Ann was going to do the baptism instead of their pastor. They might have been furious expecting to have their pastor baptize their baby instead of this white woman they didn't know. But they did not mind at all.

Because it doesn't matter who performs your baptism, it doesn't matter when or where or how they did it, it doesn't matter what rules and practices they followed. What we do have is the trust that we reside in God's mysterious, marvelous heart and we belong to the baptismal promise we heard in bible study this past week...

"No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you, or in your life, don't you ever let anyone tell you that you are anything but a precious and beloved child of God."

We belong to that promise
We belong to that mystery
We belong to the truth of Baptism

AMEN