

Scriptures:

Matthew 28:16-20

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Called and Claimed

I altered the scriptures away from today's lectionary because on a day we do a baptism I always want to get a little more focussed and because I sadly missed the last one here at Squamish United I wasn't sure what was said or done on that day. I did hear Adam's baptism was lovely though it was one of the hardest Sunday's for me to miss. Why because the sacrament and ritual of baptism is my favourite sacrament (hopefully its not heresy to have a favourite sacrament but if it is I'm certain many would find a long list of heresies in my faith so I'm okay with it.

I love baptism because it is an act of blessing and honouring of the gift of a persons life. Taking a moment to thank God and dedicate the life of this person to love and grace, hope and peace. It is an opportunity for us to remember the gifts of our own lives and to reminded that we are not alone and that for the moment we are even considered God journey's with us.

Many might see baptism just as an ancient ritual. Many would question if it even matters at all. Most do it because they know their grandmother or their mother want them to do it. They come into the church on that day and we don't see them again until their Wedding day (Or maybe a Christmas here and there). And so, Baptism gets relegated to funny stories or cute photo opps. And we all know the parental requests when the babies are brought forth in their new frilly white outfits which mom and dad call "christening dresses," despite the fact that most of us in the Protestant tradition don't "christen" at all. To "christen" is to give a name. We assume the parents have already done that. We "baptize." But it doesn't really matter because the requests are not theological, are they? They are instead, "Reverend, may we get a few pictures of you holding the baby?" "Christen," "Baptize," who cares? I have more than once had someone call out of the blue and say over the phone I'd like to get my baby 'done.' I can translate what that means but in that instant I am sure it is more about the ancient ritual than about a intentional faith practice. Ritual isn't bad but it is always a bit sad when we forget the purpose behind the sacred sacramental practice. Admittedly I am more willing to do a baptism than some ministers. Why because I can't help but believe that the blessing of a child should be welcomed in any moment. The second meaning of a baptism however is the joining of a Christian community and sometimes that is a bit of a stretch. That is why it is always beautiful to have a baptism like today, a baptism with a family who is striving to commit their lives lived in faith as perfect or flawed as that might be.

With all that being said however one might ask why continue with this ritual at all?

For one thing Jesus mentions it often and when the gospel writers tell The Jesus Story, Baptism is crucial. Everything starts at the river where Jesus entered the waters and placed himself in the

arms of his cousin John. "And the heavens were opened. And the Spirit descended upon him as a dove. And a Voice came from heaven saying, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" And despite the beauties and sentiment of the birth narratives, in truth the ministry and teachings and trials and triumphs and almost all that we worship and make us remember Jesus took place after his baptism.

It was at the moment of Baptism that Jesus was claimed and called. Sure, the angels sang at Bethlehem, but the actual voice of God spoke for the first time at the river, acknowledging that Jesus was claimed by Someone special and called to do something special. So, when in liturgical services like the one for this Sunday, we are challenged to "Remember our baptisms," the challenge is actually to remember that you, too, just like Christ, belong to Someone special and are called to do something special.

This is the reminder that at some point in time, a voice spoke your name and said, "This is My beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." Perhaps you were only a baby when that happened, too small to understand the concept of God, too young to know that there even is a God. But that wasn't the point. Remember, Jesus didn't say or do anything at his baptism either. It was all a matter of God claiming him, just as in your own baptism, God claimed you before you'd done a single thing to earn it. Paul Tillich was correct when he said that, "Salvation is simply accepting the fact that we have (already) been accepted." On this day we acknowledged the fact that God has already said to Olivia and James, you are loved, beloved, chosen and created for great things.

The Rev. Dr. Michael Brown tells a story of a man he knew, a leader in his congregation. He writes "When I knew him, he was an example of all things good and decent and helpful. His wise faith gave guidance to our whole church, and his courageous commitments gave leadership. But, by his own admission, he had not always been that way. He told me that as a young man, in his words, "I was always looking for trouble. And if the trouble were really bad, I'd look for it twice! But then," he said, "I met Elizabeth--a kind, sweet, moral, smiling girl who loved me no matter how big a scoundrel I was. And little by little, because I wanted to live up to her love, I became less and less a scoundrel. Finally we married, and I've spent my whole life trying to make her as happy as she made me." Then he said something I have never forgotten, a powerful statement. He said this: "The truth is, Elizabeth loved me into loving."¹

This is the same claim God places upon us. Scriptures says Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. I love this ritual because in scripture it is always the turning point in a life of faith, it is the moment God claims us. God sends unearned, unconditional love our way. Brown continues "I met Elizabeth," my friend said, "who loved me no matter how big a scoundrel I was."

Theologically, we call that grace, and nowhere is it more visibly symbolized than in Baptism.

"This is My beloved child," whom this day I choose as my own, not by their merit, but by My mercy! That's what God said to Jesus at the river and what God says to you and me. I choose you as part of My family. I choose you to possess Divine legacy. I choose to "walk with you through the waters, and the rivers shall not overwhelm you ... and to walk with you through the fire, and the flames shall not consume you ... You are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you ... So fear not, for I choose to be with you" in all things, in all times, in all places, in all

¹ The Rev. Dr. Michael Brown http://day1.org/4406-does_baptism_matter

circumstances, now and forever. I choose to love you whether or not you are always lovable. That's the message of Baptism, one which should grip and inspire us: It is a symbol that we are claimed by Someone special.

And as was the case with Jesus, so it is with us, Baptism says that we are claimed by Someone special and we are called to do something special. "And the Spirit descended upon him as a dove." And so does The Spirit descend upon you and me, calling us not simply to be God's children but also to be God's helpers in a wounded, weary world. Claimed and Called."²

When I read the line from Brown's story "I wanted to live up to her love," I got it. I get that in my marriage and as a parent and even more so in my faith. I want to somehow in my flawed nature live up to the love that has been given me through this precious life I live.

That is what baptism is its a beautiful, precious, sacred moment when we claimed, in spite of ourselves, and the prayer and hope and desire of this day is that once we become aware of how deeply we are loved by God, we will find ourselves falling in love with God also. And we express that love by how we do our living in this world. How we love and accept and cherish the life we have been given, offering that same love and grace to others. That, I think, is what it means to be called. It really is that simple. God loves us into loving.

I loved another story that Brown shared about a gifted carpenter who builds at least two Habitat for Humanity houses a year. "He's quite a gifted carpenter and can get twice the work done in half the time it takes most people. Some years he works on five or six Habitat projects, but he has made both God and himself a promise that he will always do at least two. He's honoured that commitment for over thirty years. Brown asked him once about the source of his passion for that ministry, and he told him a story. "After returning from Vietnam, he struggled to readjust. He had no close family structure, so he drifted ... town to town, job to job. The one thing he did have was a talent for carpentry, so he could usually find a building site that needed an extra hand. Finally, in a small Midwestern town, he signed on to help build a development of six moderately sized and affordably priced houses. He told the foreman that he would be happy not only to do carpentry but also to provide security, bringing his sleeping bag with him and spending the nights on site. So he did that, house by house. The owner of the company was impressed by the man's abilities and commitment--and he was also aware that apparently he had no other place to sleep. So, at the close of the project, almost a year in the making, the business owner took the man aside and said: "I want to thank you for what you've done. And I want you to stay on with the company." Then he handed the man a set of keys and said: "The sixth house we built is yours. Take it." "But I can't pay for it," the carpenter said," to which his employer answered: "You'll find a way." "My volunteer work," he told me, "is how I have repaid him. At least twice a year I put a roof over the head of someone else who needs it, just as he did over mine."

Baptism symbolizes that we are loved free of charge. Someone special claims us, asks us to stay on with the company, to be part of the family. "This is My beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." And that act of grace loves us into loving. This claim of grace and love are the core of my faith. When I was ordained into the United Church I was asked why the UCC knowing I have been in many other denominations. My response was it is all about grace. "I would always rather

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err on the side of grace.” I have had grace extended to me more than once and I hope others have experienced it from me as well. It is one of the ways I seek to share my faith and live in gratitude for what I have been given. We remember our Baptism and are so overwhelmed by being claimed that we suddenly feel called. "The Spirit descends as a dove" and settles into our hearts, and we want to pay all the favours of grace forward, sharing with others the gift that has been shared with us.

And so, on this day remember your Baptism ... and live into your calling.

Let us pray. Holy one, who claims and calls us to be your partners in the world, descend as a dove, rest upon us, and work through us today and always we pray. Amen.