

Baptism Stories

An Interactive Message for Sunday Morning Worship on the 3rd Sunday of Eastertide
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 15, 2018

Text: Acts 8:26-39

This morning our task is to spend some time talking about baptism so let's begin at the beginning. What is baptism? (*pause for responses*)

- In the UCC *Book of Worship*: “a sign and seal of our common discipleship; through baptism Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the church in every time and place.”
- In the *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*: “the rite of washing with water as a sign of religious purification and consecration.”
- According to the dictionary: “the religious rite of sprinkling water onto a person's forehead or of immersion in water, symbolizing purification or regeneration and admission to the Christian Church.”

Now that we've established a common understanding of this sacrament, let me ask, how many of you have been baptized? (*pause*) Who has been a parent presenting a child for baptism or a godparent/sponsor for a child being presented for baptism? (*pause*) What did you understand your responsibilities to be? (*pause for responses*)

Let's take a moment to review the vows made at a UCC baptism, just as a reminder:

- “Will you encourage this child to renounce the powers of evil and to receive the freedom of new life in Christ?”
- “Will you teach this child that he/she may be led to profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?”
- “Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best as you are able?”
- (to parents and sponsors) “Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow with this child in the Christian faith, to help this child to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, by celebrating Christ's presence, by furthering Christ's mission in all the world, and by offering the nurture of the Christian church so that this child may affirm his/her baptism” at the time of Confirmation?”

Wow! Pretty intimidating, isn't it. These are some pretty hefty promises, and I think in the moment of the baptism of that precious little baby or squirming toddler, we're not really thinking about the enormity of what those promises are. We're not really focused on what those vows are asking of us as adults presenting a child for baptism as either a parent or godparent. Do you remember agreeing to those promises for your own child or as a

godparent? How do you think you did in living out those vows? *(pause for responses)* I don't think any of us feel we lived up to that responsibility as fully as the vows imply. I know I feel like I could have done a better job with my kids. The truth is, life just happens and those baptism vows fade into the background as daily life unfolds. We do what we can, but in hindsight it never seems like, feels like, enough.

In our contemporary, 21st century culture, all too often baptism is often seen just as a social activity, a rite of passage which has little to do with the child's actual upbringing in the Christian faith. As a pastor I've received calls from people wanting to baptize their children here for no other reason than it was convenient. In one instance, the whole family was coming to the area during the summer for a gigantic family reunion and vacation and they wanted to do the baptism while everyone was together. No one lived in this area. No one was especially connected to a church anywhere. But they wanted their baby baptized and this seemed like the best opportunity to do that. I can tell you that the Deacons and I talked a lot about this one. We had to because our understanding of baptism is that it is an initiation into a specific faith community which agrees as a community to take on the joint responsibility of raising the baptized child as a Christian child. You'll remember I'm sure that at every baptism the congregation makes a vow too. The pastor

asks, “do you who witness and celebrate this sacrament promise your love, support, and care to the one about to be baptized as he/she lives and grows in Christ?” And the congregational response is not a simple “we do.” Instead, you have to say to the child, the parents and godparents, “we promise our love, support and care.” That’s because for us in the congregational tradition, baptism is always a communal event, not an individual one. We recognize that living a life of faith takes a community of support because it is a lifelong endeavor that is not easy or simple.

Admittedly, much of this thinking assumes that it is an infant or child who is being baptized but in the United Church of Christ, we also baptize adults. It is more rare but not unheard of. It is, interestingly, more often done in private than it is in the context of worship. This is for the simple reason that usually the baptism of an adult happens just before the person joins the church as a full member by affirmation of faith and that is where the new community connection is emphasized. Even more rarely, an adult will ask a pastor for baptism even though they have no intention of joining the church but life circumstances make baptism literally what the person needs in that moment. These events are rare and precious as the pastor through baptism opens a new conduit of love between the person and Jesus when it is most needed.

Not all Christian communities, however, baptize infants and children. Baptists of every type believe only in what is called

“believer’s baptism,” that is baptism of an adult who is old enough and mature enough to make the vows of baptism for themselves. This is why there is no rite of confirmation in Baptist churches. The time of preparation we have for youth to be confirmed into the church, making the baptismal vows for themselves, is in Baptist churches a time of preparation for baptism itself. Further, Baptists believe only full immersion constitutes baptism. We on the other hand practice what is called aspersion baptism or the sprinkling of water on the forehead. The Catholic Church practices affusion baptism or the pouring of water over the head. But guess what, it all means exactly the same thing.

For us, baptism is truly an initiation into a community of believers. It is not an individual event. This is why a “drive-by baptism” request from this group of vacationers posed a real conundrum for the Deacons and myself. It doesn’t feel right to deny a request for baptism, ever. But, if the baptism is unanchored from a faith community which can live out the vows made to love, support and care for the child, how can we baptize the child? We can’t ask the congregation to make vows they can’t keep. So, you may be wondering what we ultimately decided. Well, the Deacons agreed that I could offer to do it as a private baptism at another location, with the family fulfilling the congregational vow role. Interestingly, when I called the person back, they had decided after their conversation with me, to go to a

church with which they had some connections for the baptism after all.

That conversation provided the Deacons and myself with a unique opportunity to talk about what baptism really means to this church as a community of Christians. As we talked we realized that baptism has to be much more than just a social event or a rite of passage. It needs to mean something real. It needs to have some chance of accomplishing the goals its vows establish for the raising of a Christian child, and the nurture of a Christian adult. Both the family and the congregation need to be in a position to teach the child by word and example what being a Christian means. We all promise together to celebrate Christ's presence in our daily lives, to further Christ's mission in the world and by offering each child, youth and adult the nurture of the Christian church so they can grow in faith. In other words, it is quite literally true that it takes a church to raise a Christian. It takes an entire community of people who know and love Jesus to nurture the faith in each person over the course of a lifetime. No one can be a Christian alone. It's just not possible. And that, dear friends, is a very radical idea indeed.

That's why I love this story we read from Acts today about the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch who was a high official in the court of the Candace or Queen of the Ethiopians. From the description of this man, whom Philip was sent to encounter as he

traveled to Gaza from Jerusalem, we know several notable facts. He was a eunuch, which meant he was essentially a gender-neutral male, a reality which made being a convert to Judaism impossible. He was Ethiopian so he was an African man, a black man. He was well educated, because he was reading aloud from the book of Isaiah when Philip encountered him. And I love the verbal exchange between the Ethiopian and Philip. When Philip encountered the man riding in his chariot heading home, he asks him, “do you know what you are reading?” Sort of an impertinent question to ask a man who was riding in a royal chariot, no doubt dressed in fine tunics and attended by at least one servant who was driving the chariot. Philip, on the other hand, would have looked like the disciples always looked – scruffy and unkempt wearing the clothes typical of peasants in that time and place. “Do you know what you are reading” was definitely a gutsy question. But, the Ethiopian isn’t annoyed. In fact, he responds to Philip’s question very favorably – “How can I unless someone guides me?”

And there it is. The key concept behind our understanding of baptism. We all need someone to help us understand this faith into which we are being baptized. We all need help in understanding the Bible and what it says, in knowing how to respond to certain situations as Jesus would have us do, in living into reality the connection between ourselves and this God who loves us beyond all reason. We all need help to understand the

enormity of our individual quests to live as Christians in a very unchristian world. And that's why baptism in our tradition takes place within the context of community. It's the only way it makes sense because the community of the church is the ultimate teacher and nurturer of the faith.

What makes this story of the Ethiopian and Philip even more interesting to me is that, once the man and Philip have what was evidently a very eye-opening conversation about the Isaiah text the man was reading, the man sees water and asks to be baptized, right there and then. Philip agrees and they go down into the water together. As soon as Philip baptizes the man, he is snatched away leaving the man alone. But, the man is so happy he just continues on his way rejoicing. I've often wondered what happened when he got back to Ethiopia because there were no other Christians there at the time – at least not yet. I'm thinking maybe he was so happy that he started one himself. Hey, it's possible! There is an ancient tradition of Christianity in that area of the world!

The other thing I'd like to point out with regard to this story is that it makes clear how completely the Christian faith upset the status quo at the time of its origin and is still capable of doing today. This story shows that the first recorded conversion of a person to Christianity through the act of baptism was of a man who was a black African, gender neutral, non-Jewish professional

male who worked for a female head of state. Dear friends, this baptism broke every rule there was to break even as it made clear that the people who follow Christ are destined to change the world, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, whether they want to or not.

So, dear friends, as you head out into your week, I hope you will pause to consider your own baptism. What do you know about it? Who was there? What were the hopes of those people who brought you for baptism? Or, if you were baptized as an adult, what brought you to that decision? For all of us, I invite you to ponder how you live out your baptism each day and what you'd do differently if you could. Finally, I remind us all that we are, each one of us, part of this community of faith and the worldwide community of Christians. That means a whole lot of people have promised in different ways to give us their love, support and care as we continually grow into the persons God always intended us to be. We do not make this journey of life alone. With God's help, we make it together as a faithful community of individuals baptized into the household of faith. Thank you, Jesus! Amen.