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Renewing our Baptismal Promises

How many of us were baptized as infants? Most of us probably don't remember their baptism, correct? Is there anyone here who does remember their baptism? Are there any other baptism stories out there? Did your parents or relatives share any stories about your baptism?

I only know about my baptism because it was a bit unique. I was born, as my mother told it, "breech, blue, and with the cord wrapped around your neck." She had fallen down the stairs when she was pregnant with me and I appear to have been somewhat jostled in the womb. So, at the former St. Luke's Hospital in Pittsfield, it was deemed that I was to be baptized immediately as they thought that 6 lb 2 oz newborn Nesbit wasn't going to make it. So, on my baptism certificate, by date of baptism is 4/13/62.

In the Congregational church or at least in the view of the UCC, baptism is one of two sacraments, the other being Communion which we will celebrate later this morning. We get the Scriptural roots for baptism as we know it today from the Gospels and the stories of John the Baptist. Remember, we read about John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, early on in Luke's gospel. But what kind of baptism was John performing?

Let's get a little academic to start. The Bible, we believe, was first written in Greek. Ritual washings or baptisms were not new to the Greeks as they would pour water over their ships to "christen" them, much like how ships are christened with champagne bottles in more modern times. We are told that the Romans followed suit. So, the idea of giving something or someone a new start had been around.

Also, the Jewish customs around ritual bathing and cleaning were pretty spelled out and varied based on the reasons why you were performing a cleansing ritual. So, for John to baptize people after telling them to repent was not anything new for the Jewish people. There were other "baptizers" around. They were used to seeing this and it dated back all the way to the prophet Ezekiel who lived 600 years before Christ and wrote of God's promise to Israel: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you to cleanse you from all your impurities, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you" (36:25-27).

It appears that Jesus chose baptism as a means to signal the start of his work to establish the reign or kingdom of God on earth. He did not line up his apostles and followers and tell them that they had to be baptized in order to follow him. It was done as a means of repentance and signified a fresh start for those who participated. But what does baptism mean for us today?

I could try and give you a history of baptism in the Christian church but, at some point, you'd start to boo and demand coffee hour. So, for our purposes this morning, let's look at what baptism means for us today. For us, baptism serves as an initiation

sacrament to become a Christian. Baptism, whether as an infant or adult, gives us the grace to start again in life. Now, with infants people get into the great debate of original sin; this is another that we don't have enough time for today or in any Sunday worship. Dissertations have been written about original sin so we are going to have to find our own working definition of baptism, let alone original sin.

Let us use this to define what it does for us: "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." Although we are not celebrating Jesus' baptism in the exact manner that we are being baptized, I thought it would be a great chance for those of us to renew our own baptismal promises that may have been made for us as infants. I wish I had some water to sprinkle at you; maybe next year we can have our own water ritual in church.

Introduction to the renewal of the Promises of Baptism

Our God created new life forms and brought them up from the waters of chaos, embraced them, and called them good. Jesus, baptized in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, became living water for us and embraces all of us. Jesus embraces those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized and all others who come seeking. We follow Jesus with our Baptism, marking a starting place for new life and new ways of being. We join Jesus in love and service. Let us prepare our hearts and minds to see, feel, and hear again the vows of Baptism.

Paul: Do you renew and affirm the promises made at your Baptism? If so, please say "I do."

All: I do.

Do you recognize the call of God to be God's people always?

All: I do.

Paul: Do you embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry?

All: I do

Paul: Do you accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews your spirit each day?

All: I do.

Paul: Do you accept and embrace others who seek the same?

All: I do.

In renewing your baptismal vows, remember your Baptism as a mark of acceptance and welcome into the care of Christ's church where you may begin again your Christian faith and life. Please join with me in the Spirit of Prayer

O God, we rejoice in your grace, given and received.

We thank you that you claim us,

that you wash us, strengthen us, and guide us,

that you empower us to live a life worthy of our calling.

In the way of Jesus, make us as water in a dry and thirsty world.

Establish us to be places of refreshment.

Root us and nurture us in love,

that with all your people, that we may rightly and justly serve you.

Fill us with your fullness

that our lives may overflow in service and love. Amen.