

January 10, 2016 Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

(Quote from David Lose about being beloved, from David Lose.net blog on 1/5/15)

Let us pray... May the words

Grace and peace, mercy and love, to you, beloved of Christ. Amen.

Let me begin with a story: A few years ago at Salem Lutheran in Uptown, in the congregation I used to serve, one of the teens, Luke, approached me one Sunday asking if he and his sister could be baptized.

And by the way, he wondered, could we do the baptism in the big tub.

My response: Of course you can be baptized, and sure you can be baptized in the big, immersion font.

Chad knew well that Salem had come to share a life and a facility with two other congregations: one was United Church of Christ, and the other was Disciples of Christ—a progressive protestant denomination that practices believers baptism.

As we'd designed the building with the architects, the Disciples of Christ part of the family needed not simply a bowl, or even a big bowl like we have here, but—and this would have been a deal breaker in our budding ecumenical partnership—they needed an immersion font, where an adult could be immersed.

So that's precisely what we designed, a baptismal area with an immersion font, as well a larger bowl font.

All the baptisms were shared by the whole community—all three churches—for really we baptize people into the Christian tradition, not a specific denomination.

So back to Luke's request. Sure, we had the capacity to do this baptism, but then I started wondering how, really, *to do* this kind of baptism.

I'd baptized a few adults before, but never in that many gallons of water, never in that way.

These are things they honestly just don't teach Lutheran pastors in seminary or Divinity School!

About that time, the Disciples of Christ congregation called a new pastor to serve their church, Pr. Laurie.

One of the first things that Pastor Laurie and Pastor Don (UCC) and I did together was a little baptism class.

We filled up the big tub and we put on our gym clothes and we literally practiced baptizing one another, over and over again,

I needed *to learn* very practically how this plugging your nose, bending knees, dipping back works.

But I also wanted *to feel* very physically and spiritually and emotionally how it feels.

I didn't want to be re-baptized, no not at all; I was baptized as a baby.

But just the same, I wanted to experience it.

It turns out, that time was one of the best get-to-know-you kind of things we three pastors ever did together.

So jump forward a few years, to this August, to one of my first weeks here at Hope.

Wayne Lee, one of the creative and mechanical and wonderfully quirky saints of this community is telling me a little about our beautiful baptismal font.

He's showing me how to fill it by opening the little trap door on the side, mentioning movement, the heater. And, then, God bless him, Wayne says, "We put a lot of thought into the fallibility of a mechanical system." I chuckled at that line, for it says so much about our congregation, and also our values.

We're thinkers, we work things out, I know that, and I appreciate it, AND we value baptism, we bothered to spend time and money and attention because this water and the word, they are at our very heart.

What I love so much about today's Gospel, this story of Jesus' Baptism, is how it *just happens*.

There's no stress about plugging your nose or bending your knees or dipping back.

There's no thought on the fallibility of the mechanical system.

There's no weirdly divisive control of the church concerned for the right-ness or the efficacy of the grace.

There is simply the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven:

You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.

True, there is a crowd murmuring with expectation, questioning where they'll find the messiah.

True, the politics are, scandalous, for you may not have even noticed but in those few verses the lectionary-people skipped, John was shut up in prison for he dared raise concern over Herod's affair with his brother's wife.

So, right there, with things as messy as ever, the heavens open—it just happens: then the Holy Spirit alights, then we hear, ***You are my Child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.***

That's the good news, in the midst of the politics, in the mucky waters, with a whole community that needs God's acceptance as much as we do, it comes:

You are my Child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Here's new life, here's eternal life, here's a community of sisters and brothers, here's a mission-a-calling that can last a life-time.

We may want to get up and jog right out of here, like my friend Bill who tells about being baptized when he was a teenager, remembering his dad's firm hand on his shoulder, right here, stay right here.

We may want to cry out, you've got it wrong God, I'm not really the one you want, but instead **God who created you, God who formed you, God SAYS, Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.**

We may wonder if we could possibly speak up to the powers,
or ask the hard questions of the doctors,
or name aloud the injustice and pain we see and feel,
and then people like Dr. King call us again beloved community,
and bid us to the arc that bends toward justice.

It's Pastor Kate, our Lutheran Campus Pastor whose email signature states first her name, then on the second line Child of God, and then finally her work title and other details.

I know, I know, there are plenty of reasons—frankly, good reasons—why this won't work for many, but even if you don't type it in, what if you just imagine it right there...

How would that change your daily work? Your sense of vocation?

At it's best, baptism is about identity—who we are, and whose we are.

Really, our most primary identity, our most primary title is Beloved Child of God.

In the verses that follow closely from today's gospel, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, then soon after into the synagogue to preach his state own version of the State of the Union.

One of my friends put me on to the idea of preemptive grace. What a phrase. Preemptive grace.

Grace claims us first, preemptively, and from that grace-filled space, we act.

Beloved of Christ, the "God who raised Jesus from the dead is the same one who promised in baptism to never abandon us and to love and accept us always and still as beloved children, even and especially when we have a hard time loving and accepting ourselves." (quote from David Lose)

This doesn't mean that we won't screw up—we do, we will, repentance is real and needed, but it's like Anne Lamott's line, "Grace meets you where you are, but never leaves you there."

As legend has it, in Belmont, North Carolina in the days of slavery, there was a stone where black men once were forced to stand to be auctioned as slaves.

Over the years that stone has been reworked, reclaimed.

Now it is a baptismal font where God's waters of justice tumble freely,

where in baptism God's people, women and men, kids, infants are freed to be children of God.

Baptism is the great equalizer, if only we let it, if only we dare to believe the promises for ourselves, and for all of creation, Jew and Greek, gay and straight and trans, black and brown and white, slave and free. **Beloved, beloved of God, created for good.**

Hear it again, and again and again, dear ones, for this is about our identity:

You are a beloved child of God. With you God is well-pleased. Amen.