

“In the Beginning: Becoming Christians”

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10,
Matthew 6:1-21*

Part I of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

February 26, 2020

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020 dedicated to the 522 babies, infants, teens and adults we have baptized into Christian since January 2000 & always to the glory of God!

“In the Beginning: Becoming Christians”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-21

Part I of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

“Christians are made not born,” said Tertullian in the 2nd Century. Those words have held true through the 20 and ¼ centuries of faith in which we Christians have been in existence.

We become Christians by becoming a part of a community with a distinctive way of life, involving definite ethical and creedal commitments. And the change in our being is marked by sacraments that say and show what God is doing to bring us to faith. We are initiated into our faith tradition and baptism is the

sign and seal of Christian initiation. It is how we become Christians.

We come through the front door and we proclaim for ourselves or for our children how we will be Christian. Then, we spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out how best to live out the promises we have made.

To become a Christian requires a number of things. It requires renouncing. It requires dying. It requires rising. It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ (not in some Christian denomination or belief structure). It requires accepting the Holy Spirit in your life. It requires receiving water and that same Holy Spirit you just proclaimed you accepted. In the end, being made a Christian is about water and the Holy Spirit. It's about sealing our commitments with anointing oil. It's about being real.

To be made a Christian, each one of us must renounce the power of evil. Evil is powerful. In his book, The People of the Lie, psychologist M. Scott Peck describes evil as the state of chaos created by people in this world. Ones who are evil and create and sustain an environment of chaos are good at it and determined to create it and sustain it. They are good at planting seeds of doubt about those who are good and loving and grace-filled. They usually present themselves as good – sometimes better than others.

But, make no mistake about it, while they rationalize their actions, their intentions are to tear down and destroy. To truly

become a Christian, each one of us must renounce evil and seek the freedom of new life in Christ – an ancient and radical action!

To be made a Christian, each one of us must die. Some of us don't care for language of evil and death. But, each of us must acknowledge that every day in some way, we all face a little dying – dying to ourselves, to our egos, to our ways of doing things. It means dying to our carefully-constructed belief systems about ourselves and about other people. It also means dying to the belief system that the actual end of life is only that and nothing more.

No one likes to die, even though every one of us is one step closer to death each day that we are alive. So, for those considering becoming Christians, this “dying stuff” can cause us to drag our feet. But, if you can accept dying as part of God's plan of preparation for eternal life in Christ, dying to self, dying to the old ways of gracelessness and lovelessness are essential features of our faith. To truly become a Christian, each one of us must die to sin and become alive in Christ Jesus.

Dying always comes before a resurrection. Once we have “died to self, died to gracelessness, died to lovelessness, died to sin,” we rise as newly born people in Christ. We experience a new birth! In the words of John 3:5, *“no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born by water and the Spirit.”* This is done through water and the Holy Spirit. It is done by words and actions. Our new life comes from a new attitude and new direction in Christ Jesus.

To be made a Christian, each one of us must proclaim faith in Jesus Christ, not in any denomination, creed or church covenant. Ultimately, to be made a Christian in baptism means your faith, allegiance and life is committed to Jesus. Anyone who tries to tell you any differently is lying.

In the 522 baptisms I have participated in here (454 infant or young children baptisms and 68 teen or adult baptisms), we have baptized all in the name of the *“Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”* No one is ever baptized into “First Church.” None of you should ever be baptized into a congregation. If you are, it is a cult. It is not Christian. Make no mistake about that. The family of faith that welcomes has a street address and a city, state and zip code, but the name on the mailbox should always be “Jesus Christ.” The water flowing down from the top of your head to your toes should always be flowing in the name of the “Father, the Son and Holy Spirit” – never in the name of a congregation or any pastor.

For folks who are ecumenical, this very consoling. But, for folks who are more concerned about their Congregationalism and about their street address and zip code than whose name is on their forehead, this might seem troubling. God knows us by name, not by address. We are children of God completely, not by degree. To be made a Christian means that we need to acknowledge (and perhaps struggle with) others whose identity in Christ is vastly different from ours.

In this regard, I am a brother in Christ with Pat Robertson, and Joel Osteen and the list goes on. Through our baptisms, we are kindred in Christ, although we have very different expressions of our faith. There are those in the Christian communion (in this city) who have literally spit on my name and called me a heretic and worse. There is one pastor who preached a sermon and then ranted on the radio that I was the devil incarnate years ago when I became among the first Columbus pastors to welcome LGBTQ people and marry them into Christian faith close to 30 years ago. But I was then, and I am now, in relationship with that pastor because Christ has bound us together through our baptism into him.

Like it or not, the same could be said for a host of people in your life whose names pop into your mind, but whose message or treatment of you is far from your heart or the heart of God. If you struggle with this, imagine how God must feel! As a parent of all children of the earth, God is in relationship to all of us, no matter how abusive we are of God's name and being. That's one reason why I am glad I am not God. God's grace prevails in spite of us not because of us.

If you are in Christ Jesus, if you have been initiated into our faith through baptism, be at peace. And remember, Jesus doesn't care about your address. He only cares about you and your identity as one who seeks to follow him. To truly become a Christian, each one of us must accept the name of Jesus Christ and then dedicate our lives to living in his way. It is the way of truth, of love, of compassion, of justice. It is the way of hope and service above

self. It is the way of seeing the unseen and embracing the unknown.

In the New Testament, there are four different baptisms – John’s baptism, Jesus’ baptism, baptisms performed before Jesus’ death and then after his death. And in Acts alone there are 11 different baptisms performed at least 9 different ways. My point is that when we speak of Christian initiation through baptism, the scripture helps us, but our traditions and practices are more helpful as they have evolved since the first century.

Through the 2020 years of Christian existence, there have been a wide-range of understandings and beliefs about who can receive baptism and when that can happen. Here at First Church, we welcome everyone to the waters of baptism but by an 87% to 13% differential, we practice newborn and infant baptism over teen and adult baptism. While the scriptural stories in the Gospels and Acts are almost completely grounded in “adult baptism,” by the third century of Christianity, as our faith grew by leaps and bounds, babies and infants were being baptized along with adults. When baptized as babies or infants the commitment was that each child would “seal their baptism” by confirming their faith as young adults. We call this Confirmation in our tradition. As a young teen, one who has been baptized returns to learn and grow in their faith in renewing ways and then kneels before God to receive the anointing oil and seal the promises made by their parents’ years before.

There are traditions in Christianity who only practice “believer baptism.” This means a baby is “dedicated” or “blessed at birth” and then makes her or his decision when a young teen with the water, spirit and oil of baptism. Dedicate a baby and baptize a teen OR baptize a baby and confirm a teen? I believe both practices of initiation have their purpose, place and validity. I also believe it is not our place to judge the practice of baptism of another stream of our faith. Let’s not get lost in how initiation happens. Rather, it is our place to bring people of all ages to Christ and then having made a choice for Him, to follow him as our Savior, to the best of our ability.

When we have been awakened by water and enlivened by the Holy Spirit, our eyes and hearts are opened. We are touched by the water of baptism and by the Holy Spirit! The Spirit moves where it will. It cannot be pinned down. It cannot be told what to do or where to go. The Spirit is our inspiration for every step we take in faith. The Holy Spirit showers us with love and grace!

In his book, The Color of Water, James McBride tells the story of his mother Ruth, an Orthodox Jew by birth who marries his father, an African-American from Brooklyn. Ruth is cast out of her faith and her family by her Orthodox father. He declares her dead to her family of origin. Ruth embraces her husband’s faith and raises their 12 children as Christians. Growing up, James always peppers his white/Jewish mother with questions about faith and the color of her skin.

Finally, one day he asks his mother, “*Momma, what color is God’s spirit?*” Ruth replies, “*God’s spirit doesn’t have a color. God is the color of water.*” With her statement of faith – “*God is the color of water*” – Ruth succinctly captures her attitudes toward race and religion. She believes that race occupies a secondary role to goodness and achievement. She believes that no matter one’s race, hard work determines worth. She believes that God loves all races and faiths equally, and that goodness and devotion, not race or class, set people apart in God’s eyes.

When Ruth says she thinks of God as “*the color of water,*” she is declaring that God is not black or white. God is all races and none. While Ruth embraces both black and white people, she is fully aware that prejudice is widespread and intense. God’s spirit, on the other hand, welcomes all people of all races, genders, sexual orientations and backgrounds.

Ruth McBride is right. “*God is the color of water.*” I believe we should come to baptism and faith in Christ bearing in mind the unity of God’s spirit and the oneness of God’s love. As we begin in Christian faith, let us always remember that to become a Christian requires a number of things. It requires renouncing. It requires dying. It requires rising in Christ. It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ. It requires accepting the Holy Spirit in your life. It requires receiving water and that same Holy Spirit you just proclaimed you accepted. In the end, being made a Christian requires water and the Holy Spirit.

Truly, to become a Christian, we need to embrace and be embraced by our God, who is the color of water. As we begin our Lenten Journey, as we enter into learning about faith more deeply and intentionally, let us remember that each one of us is made into a Christian. We aren't born this way. We are adoptive children of this faith of ours. Today and always, remember your baptism and keep it holy. Amen.