

# From the Pulpit

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## *“Baptismal Justice”*

*Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew  
3:13-17*

January 12th, 2013

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Senior Minister

A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The Baptism of Christ, January 12, 2014, dedicated to Reese Elizabeth Magaw on her baptismal which she now shares, eight years to the day with her mother, Becky, to Madeline Aeschbury for her courage in the face of surgery and recovery and always to the glory of God!

*“Baptismal Justice”*

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*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.*

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Today, on this glorious day in which you and I were touched by Reese Elizabeth Magaw being carried to the baptismal waters of love and grace, eight years to the day that I baptized her mother, Becky, and on this day when most of you were splashed by baptismal water, I invite you to join me in reflecting on baptism.

Some of the greatest theological lessons I have learned in life were never taught in seminary - even Yale Divinity School. This is certainly true in relation to baptism. Neither Yale nor the Holy Bible could have prepared me to deal with any number of situations related to baptismal inquiries, decision-making, or baptismal practice. These lessons were all under the instruction of The Go-Between God.

First, let’s acknowledge that the key element of baptism beyond water is The Holy Spirit – who I like to call - "**The Go-Between God.**" I believe there is a force in our lives and in the Universe- which causes us to see in a way which we have not seen before. This force makes the landscape or a person or an idea come to life for us. It becomes a presence toward which we surrender ourselves (or don’t).

At least that is how it works in my life. I hope in yours too. I respond, I delight, I fall in love, I worship - yet I am not the one who takes the first step, who opens up to reality in a holy new love. In every such encounter, there is an

anonymous third party who makes the introductions and who acts as a go-between making me aware of another being. This third party makes all of us aware of each other. This go-between sets up new lines of communication and although invisible, the “Go-between God” is the power source for the Universe and the soul. The Go-between God does not simply exist between two people but activates each from the inside and motivates both into acts of mission and mercy; to live in the power and the grace of God. (Drawn from John V. Taylor's 1973 book, The Go-Between God).

In Isaiah, it is God who speaks about God’s “Go-Between” Spirit given to the prophet. God says:

*“Take a good look at my servant. I’m backing him to the hilt. He’s the one I chose and I couldn’t be more pleased with him. I’ve bathed him with my Spirit, my life. He’ll set everything right among the nations. He won’t call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won’t brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won’t disregard the small and insignificant, but he’ll steadily and firmly set things right. He won’t tire out and quit. He won’t be stopped until he’s finished his work—to set things right on earth. Far-flung ocean islands wait expectantly for his teaching.”* (Isaiah 42:1-4, in The Message).

God is saying that the Spirit has been given to the prophet to fulfill the work God has intended to be done. Justice will come through the Spirit of God. This spirit of God is present throughout the scriptures. I think of Moses approaching the burning bush – not as scientific observer, but as one who fully recognizes that the same fiery essence which the bush possesses burns inside of him simultaneously. His heart AND the bush are aflame with a fire which does not consume, but rather transforms. He AND the bush are caught and held, as it were, in the same magnetic field!

This force is personal. Very personal! But, it is also the power source for all Judaeo-Christian reality. We call this source the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit! To paraphrase Jewish mystic and theologian, Martin Buber, The Holy Spirit turns an It into a Thou. The Holy Spirit is the pivot point of life!

The Holy Spirit was the one who was and is and forever shall be present when the Lord is present between us. It is the Holy Spirit which holds together while we are absent one from another. This "Go-Between God" is the mortar in the brick of our faith! It is that which binds and holds us together! Without the Holy Spirit, nothing can happen which is the mission of the church! Without the Holy Spirit, our reason for existing as Christians (and I would say as Human Beings) is in absolute jeopardy. With the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible!

In our Gospel text from Matthew, known as the Baptism of our Lord, it is the Go-Between God who enters Jesus (and John) during the baptism on the Jordan River! In Acts 10:34ff it is the Go-Between God who gives Peter courage and “get-up-and-go” to baptize the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. It simply has to be the Holy Spirit because no other power in the Universe could have carried Peter so far outside his comfort zone to take action on behalf of gentiles - especially a military commanding Gentile who possessed such power and an immediate and real threat to Peter and his new movement of fledgling believers!

Today, the Go-Between God is here, holding you and me together in Christian community and opening us to stretch outside our comfort zones and join Peter in speaking to those we ordinarily don't speak to or fear for some reason. It is the Holy Spirit who puts these words in Peter's mouth and our mouths - "Surely God shows no partiality!" In other words, "Surely God is not biased! Surely God is not prejudiced! Surely God doesn't show favoritism!" To state this in positive terms- Surely, God is just!" It is the Holy Spirit who preaches and practices Baptismal Justice.

As for the situations I described, what is it that I was empowered to do with the power of the Go-Between God?

Way outside our comfort zones.... That is where the Holy Spirit calls us.

I was way, way outside my comfort zone on a cold, winter day in Cleveland, Ohio in 1985 when I received a call from one of my Westside neighbors in great distress. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. But, they were at Metro-General Hospital and they asked if I could come over and baptize their baby. I agreed and off I went. When I arrived I found the mother rocking her child who was stillborn and had died several hours before. Fresh from Yale, I knew that there was no theological or biblical justification for baptizing a baby so long deceased. But I sat with them for a long time listening. I held the baby and wept with them. These two young people really needed comfort and consolation. They needed to know that their baby hadn't gone to hell. I assured them their stillborn daughter was already in the arms of God. Using the water of baptism, I offered a blessing for their stillborn child, (but not a complete baptism) reassuring them that although God didn't seek to take such a beautiful, God nevertheless welcomed her into his everlasting arms. With that, we prayed and began to prepare her funeral. The Go-Between God was there.... And so was Jesus.

The Apostle Paul has written that we are "Baptized, once and for all time." Those words were on my mind when I was approached by a gay man asking to be re-baptized. In fact, they were the words I first spoke to him. However, he told me, I was the first pastor that had ever accepted him for who he was and he

wanted me to baptize him. Baptized as an adult, he had always believed his baptism in the dunking tank of his rural Ohio Pentecostal church had been the most powerful moment of his life! He had risen within the congregation to become a deacon – a spiritual leader within the church. But, all that changed on Sunday morning when his pastor, who he called his friend, "outed him" during a service of worship and then cast him out of the church – in front of everyone – including his wife and three daughters.

This man told me, "I feel like the church doesn't accept me or my baptism." I assured him that God accepted him and that baptism. My words didn't seem to "hold water" for him. After thinking about this and praying about it, I called him and invited him to come as a new man, with a new heart, and a renewed faith to the waters of baptism. He invited all his children to come to worship. Although several of his teenage daughters had rejected him following the outing and the subsequent divorce, they all came for his baptism. That baptismal celebration proved to be the beginning of their renewing relationships. During his baptism, he cried like a baby and so did I. The Holy Spirit was present between us! And today he is reborn in faith, with an understanding of our God who shows no partiality! The Go-Between God was there... and so was Jesus.

Stepping into a lazy Jordan River south of the Sea of Galilee, our Lord – following our God, his "Abba" ("Dad") – was baptized. He didn't have to be baptized for the redemption of sins – the "Go-Between God" was already richly dwelling within him – body, mind, and spirit. But, John baptized. God sang out his song pointing out to all were witnesses, "THIS is my beloved son!" The Go-Between God was there with Jesus.

In a seaside port city named Caesarea a few years later, in a household full of theological ambiguity (we would call them "Nones" Today), Peter was transformed by the Go-Between God. Dream weary, road weary, and confronted with his moment of truth, Peter was changed from a reluctant leader of a persecuted band of beleaguered seekers to a man who understood the very nature of God.

Standing with all ears attentive to every word he spoke, Peter was given the chance to explain what Jesus Christ had to do with them. A Roman soldier and his family were soon soaking in the waters of baptism - all because our God shows no partiality. They were embraced by the name of Jesus. They were named and claimed and held together by a force of the universe we know as the Go-Between God. And Jesus was there!

Many years ago, German Liberation Theologian Dorothee Soelle was in Brazil working with street children, of whom there were 25 million – then. She was there with a Catholic priest and a Methodist pastor. One child of the streets

came to them and asked to be baptized. The Catholic priest asked, “Into which church, then?” The boy said, “Just into Christ.” “Well then, in which building?” the priest continued. The boy answered, “No building, just here on the streets, with my friends and street family.” The Methodist said he couldn’t issue a certificate there. The priest said they couldn’t do it outside of a building. The boy insisted, saying, “This is where I met Jesus. This is where I want His Holy Spirit upon me.” So, they relented. They got two crates, laid a board on it, found an old boot, filled it flowers the children were selling on the street. They took the boy’s cup used for begging. The Catholic brought a candle. The baptism took place on the street, in the name of Jesus Christ (a story from D. Soelle, Celebrating Resistance, 1993, p. 78).

Baptismal Justice. Baptismal Grace. Baptismal Love.

The Go-Between God was there...and so was Jesus. The Go-Between God is Here and so is Jesus. Amen.

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