

“Claimed”

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
Baptism of the Lord Sunday

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

January 10, 2016

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>

Our Gospel lesson for today is Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus that took place at the Jordan River.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with **unquenchable fire.**"

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

May Light Break Forth on God's Holy Word.

Thanks be to God.

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty God, open these words to us this day by the power of your Holy Spirit. Remind us that as you claimed Jesus in his baptism, in our baptism we belong to you. Amen.

You need a good I.D. these days. Try getting through the TSA counter with a boarding pass that has your maiden name on it but **doesn't match your driver's license or passport**. Try to checkout at Kroger when your new chip card says "Check ID" and you have forgotten yours at home. Try checking out books at the library without your ID.

Proper ID matters these days. Travel from one country to the next and you need a good ID. I walked across the border from Malawi to Zambia—I needed a good ID. Think about crossing from Mexico into California, or Canada into New York.

Having a good ID matters a lot. It's the way the world distinguishes who can come in and those who can't. We are having a lot of conversation in this country, a lot of news media attention about good identification (across all walks of life) from children to graduate students to presidential candidates. ID is the way we determine who belongs and who **doesn't**.

Every time you witness a baptism, every time you see water trickle down one's forehead in church, every time you hear those ancient words, **"I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit"** it is as if God were saying, "This one just got her ID. This adult belongs. He has just been given his true identification."

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. It's a reminder of the witness the global church has made to our lives as Christians. We all experienced that reminder just a few moments ago with Isabelle. Then we renewed our baptisms. We hear the words. We feel the splash of water. We remember the promise.

For two millennia, the Sacrament of Baptism has been the public affirmation of Christian identity. Baptism, in action and words, declares exactly who we really are and whose we really are.

Jesus does not invent it. Neither John the Baptist. Water rituals had long history in Judaism. John used baptism as a sign of repentance, a symbol of changing your life's direction. But when he baptized Jesus, the meaning shifts. Immersion in the Jordan River leads to God declaring Jesus' essential identity: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

When I baptize a child, a confirmand or an adult, I look them in their eyes and say, "Amelia Rachel, child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Those words echo the words that tore the heavens in two the day of Jesus' baptism. "Mark Sullivan,

Caleb Thomas (Frank),” it’s as if we say, “You are a child of God, you are beloved, with you God is well-pleased.”

Whenever we see a child baptized, we are invited to remember past baptisms and what those baptisms meant. Perhaps you remember the baptism of your own children or grandchildren. But on a deeper level, you “remember” your own baptism. Not literally, because it was before a time of conscious memory, but you remember that there was a day when your parents or a guardian brought you up front, and water ran down your forehead and declared for eternity just exactly who you really are: “You are a child of God, You are beloved, You are one with whom God is well pleased.”

This is a bold claim. This claim unites us across generations and across denominations. Yet we live in a culture that imagines that each one of us merely belongs to ourselves. Our world fancies that your background or achievements are your real identity. The world even says that we somehow create ourselves, that “I make me who I really am.”

Well, it’s the New Year—you have a chance to try to make that personal claim again for yourself. This time of year, we are bombarded with advertisements to “improve,” “discover the New You,” “better ourselves inside and out.” Self-improvement

and achievement starts early. Interviews for the best pre-schools are more and more demanding. Your portfolio as a toddler these days is critical for early advancement. More service hours are needed for graduation, more competitive sports for youth. THE internship—THE best clerkship in the city will help make me who I am. Truth be told we all want more, too, more and better. So we strive and work and we produce and network and improve and achieve. That's what we do, that's how we live.

But against all the tide of autonomy and self-invention, baptism stubbornly declares something radically different. Baptism insists on one thing – one very big thing, first and last. Of all the possible answers to the “Who are you?” question, there is only one answer that's eternally and absolutely true. First and last, in life and in death, you are a child of God, you are beloved, you are pleasing to the Creator.

Except, let's be real. How can God be pleased with us? Just think about all the things we have done in our lifetime that, when we think about them, aren't necessarily pleasing to us, let alone God. Maybe on really good days or when we land that first great job, or when we wash up nice and neat, or when we volunteer once a month.

But what about the other days? The other days when it's a little harder to find the kind words to say to a colleague or a spouse, when it's easier to yell out your frustration than speak to someone directly. Or when the negative self-talk is a little too much to bear: "I didn't land that interview. I'll have to take more classes and apply again. The business I built is now crumbling. My marriage is falling apart. I have too much debt. I can't get out of this cycle of addiction." Can God really be pleased with me?

God knows the dark places we go and will go again. God knows the struggles we have being honest and true and responsible and brave.

And still God calls us by name and says, "I claim you, you are mine." With so much forgiveness and so much grace, there must be a catch. There must be something we have to do, something we have to prove.

Baptism says there is no catch. The Sacrament of Baptism is unconditional. It's not transactional. God claims us and receives us and covenants to be with us. Our relationship with God is the one relationship in life we can't screw up. We can't destroy it because we didn't establish it. We can neglect it, we can deny it; we can run from it. The list goes on-we can ignore

it, dispute it, but we cannot end it. God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go.

We call this grace. And it is at the core of the Christian faith. Grace doesn't make logical sense. It goes against the grain of how the world works. We cannot earn God's love. God's love comes to us as a gift. It takes a lifetime to let this sink in, to permeate our being, to respond by living into this love.

Every year we return to the story of Jesus' baptism. The Gospel writers clarify that Jesus does not need to be baptized, but he gets in line. He choose to splash into where all the other sinners were. He choose to go through with the act that was demanded of everyone else. This is to say Jesus choose to stand with humanity. Here he is, God's Messiah, plunging into the dirty water of the river, where everyone else's dirt was washed of.

The baptism of Jesus is God's great declaration of solidarity. In it—You are not alone. God makes the claim “I am with you. I am entering your life. In your brokenness and guilt and shame, in your pain and suffering, you are not alone. In your frustration with the way things are and your yearning for new life, you are not alone. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.”

Others aren't alone either. Even as we remember that we belong to God, we are challenged to acknowledge that others belong to God, too. My neighbor is baptized, beloved. My co-worker is baptized, beloved. The stranger, who may not be baptized, is still beloved. The refugee yearning for a new home and new way of life—Beloved. We are baptized into a larger global community.

On our best day and on our worst day, we adults need to hear these words. We need to hear that God is pleased with us when we work and succeed and when **we don't work and don't** succeed. God is pleased with us when we can produce and give back and also when we feel we no longer have anything to contribute. God is pleased with us when life is going along swimmingly and our outlook is rosy. God is pleased with us when we feel inadequate and lost, down and dejected. We are pleasing to God, worthy of love and care.¹

This morning I invite you to repeat after me the words we need to hear and say for ourselves: Repeat after me- **“I am a child of God/beloved by God/pleasing to God.”** We need to hear those words-we need to say those words.

¹ I am grateful to Rev. Ann Palmerton for her collaboration on the development of this sermon.

Baptism tells us that each and every one of us is chosen, loved, claimed. *[I am a child of God. I belong to God, who loves me.]*
We feel the drops of water off the branch. We plunge our hands in the water-And we remember our true identity. We are not alone. God loves you. God claims you. God forgives you. You belong to God, now, always and forever. Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC