

“Promises Made”

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Epiphany I

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January 7, 2018

From the Pulpit

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A Communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany I, January 7, 2018, dedicated to my firstborn child, Luke Timothy Sitler Ahrens, who was baptized into Christian faith on June 25, 1987 at Bethany UCC, Cleveland, Ohio and always to the glory of God!

“Promises Made”

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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 redeemer. Amen.

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On a day like this (but about 80 degrees warmer), Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The place was swarming with sinners - fallen, sorry, guilty human beings - who had come in hope of John the Baptizer cleaning up their lives and turning things around for them. The daily newspaper

and Facebook tells us what most of them had done - passing bad checks, driving drunk, unarmed robbery, failure to pay child support. Some of them would have been known to you from their pictures at the post office or appearing on nightly news in the “Crime Stoppers” section. Some were hardened criminals looking for a shortcut to heaven’s gate. Others were guilty of crimes of the heart which only they and God knew about. But, none of them lived with illusions of innocence. They were there because they knew they were covered in dirt. They had come to get cleaned-up.

Then Jesus showed up. He wasn’t famous yet. In Mark’s gospel, there are no accounts of his birth or early childhood. His life begins with baptism, so no one cleared a path when he made his way to the water. He waited in line. Later, after John had baptized him and the heavens torn apart and a voice from heaven made it clear who he was, you better believe the crowd looked at him differently. Who was this guy? What was HE doing there (John and the others wanted an answer to this!)? What was this sinless dude doing in a seething sea of sin by the river's edge? To say it was uncomfortable is an understatement. It got edgy by the river’s edge.

I believe the church has never been real comfortable with Jesus’ baptism. He was pure and innocent. He didn’t need to clean up his act. He was the cleanest act in human history.

Nevertheless, he made a choice to identify with those of us who need to clean up our act. He humbled himself to be with us, even though he wasn't like us. By so doing, he gave shape, form, and meaning to his own name - Immanuel – “God with us.” By wading in the water of the Jordan River, by receiving baptism in the hands of John, Jesus adopted us as his brothers and sisters, just as God had done through him on behalf of all creation.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are connected with God and Christ throughout time. Our adoptive connection comes through Christ's body and blood. It is our **TGNA - Through Grace Newly Adopted** - not our DNA which makes us who we are, because in Christ, we already know whose we are. It is always important to remember, we are Christians by pedigree. We are Christians by adoption.

Our job is simple – really. We are called to live into the promises we make at baptism. Last year at First Church you heard these promises close to half of the Sundays of the year as 25 babies, infants, youth and adults came to the water of baptism. 25 times women and men, youth and children, mothers and fathers spoke freely as they came for baptism.

Their promises were filled with the audacity of hope and faith. They renounced evil and accepted new life in Christ. They proclaimed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. They promised to live a good life, a life which would exemplify their faith in Christ. This includes deepening their knowledge and experience of our Christian faith, serving the world in God's spirit, doing justice and loving others more fully. It also includes teaching their children the same so that one day they could confirm their own baptismal vows. These are promises made. All of us were witnesses. All of us were participants. All of us made promises, too. We proclaimed our faith in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We promised to raise these newly baptized ones as members our family of faith.

My friends, Baptism is not about “watching.” It is about fully engaging because Christianity is not a spectator sport. When we sing *“we have put on Christ this day, sing alleluia and rejoice; we have been baptized in him, sing alleluia and rejoice,”* our perfect singing and harmonizing are beautiful – but not the end of the story. Baptism is really about the risky business of promises made and promises kept. When our children ask us the meaning of something related to Jesus Christ, we need to find answers. These are not moments to turn into You-Tube videos. They are heartfelt “whys” and “How’s” of following Jesus.

Similarly, when you receive emails, calls, and other “asks” from the Emily or me and your other sisters and brothers who serve First Church and we are asking you to pledge, to step up and serve the congregation through your nomination to serve, to teach church school, to visit the sick, to provide a meal for a family in grief or some other important appeal – we are not doing this because we have nothing else to do. Do know how hard it is for many of the callers to pick up the phone and make those calls? Or to send out the emails and appeal for a response?

In essence, we are calling you to live into your baptismal vows to serve Christ in this day, in this age, in our church, in the heart of our city. So, please answer the calls and respond to the emails. Even better, make calls and send emails yourself to ask how and where you can serve. Create new ministries and carry them out! But, **to NOT** prayerfully, seriously and intentionally consider and answer these prayerful, serious and intentional outreaches from your sisters and brothers in faith **is NOT okay.**

These are not junk emails and nuisance calls. These are heartfelt appeals and covenantal requests from members of our beloved community to serve Christ together here. Even if your answers are NO or NOT NOW or I am struggling to make ends meet, we can only be strong together when we can lift up

and serve one another, together. In a covenant community, we make promises and we are all called to live into our promises – made at Baptism, anchored in confirmation of baptism and renewed today. They are promises meant to last a lifetime.

Always remember our faith is anchored in Baptism and living into the promises we make. Baptism is like the center of the wheel. If the center holds and all the around the center spins in balance, the wheel works. If the ball bearings at the center are not balanced, the wheel will wobble and eventually throw the entire vehicle (and its rider) off the road. Today is a day for spiritual reset. It is a day to get all the wobble out of our wheels.

On this Baptism of our Lord and Savior, we get a chance to look and see that God's beloved son with whom God was well pleased lowered himself into the waters and received a baptism for the repentance of sins at the hands of John. In that singular act, Jesus cleared the path for all of us to humble ourselves before God – for all time. He comes out of the water and embraces each one of us – for all time – as his brother, as his sister – forever his family members - **TGNA - Through Grace Newly Adopted.**

So... on those days when you don't feel like a child of God, or you don't look like a child of God; or you don't act like a

child of God, remember **YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD!** You are one of God's children not because of what you have done, or who your parents are, but because out of all the Universe, God chose you to be his child. God has adopted you. God loves you.

When you are anxious or alone, defeated or deflated, God calls to you through your baptism and reminds you to relax, be calm. God calls to you, **"You did not choose me. You are mine. I chose you."**

So, look over the Jordan and what will you see? There is a band of angels holding up a sign with your name on it. As you get closer, you can read it. The sign says, "Welcome Home."
Amen.

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