

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, dedicated to Jonah Ewing on his baptismal day, to Rev. Keene Lebold, my friend and mentor, to U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords (Tucson, Ariz.), who courageously survived gun violence and the attempt on her life one year ago today, for all who struggle on after shootings and for all who die from gun violence, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Baptismal Boldness”**

**Acts 19:1-8; Mark 1:4-11**

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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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Who first told you something that was less than worthy of your bold and glorious baptism into Christ Jesus?

Who said it first that you are - a wretched offender, a miserable sinner, a no-good person? Was it your parents, when they shook you, spanked you, scolded you and told you to behave? Or your teachers, when they told you go sit in the corner or the hallway for stepping out of line? Was it your boss, when he asked you to do the project over again because you had done such a lousy job . . . and this time get it right? Or maybe your children called you names or looked at you and called you a failure as a parent?

Or did they all say something that added up to a pile of words telling you who you are: over-drinking, over-eating, over-spending, over-sexed, under-achieving, under-giving,

under-loving, or in the words of Martin Luther, “**a wormlike creature** not at all what God had in mind when devising the plan of creation” and creating the whole lot of us in “the image of God?”

Perhaps you have never heard any of these words or others that hurt you. If so, you have lived a charmed and blessed life. But if any have touched you, you know how they hurt.

**Words hurt us.** Words can tear people apart and deconstruct the personality and emotional psyche of each one of us in ways we don't even and can't even imagine. I would go so far as to say, “Words can destroy” a person. We say, from our earliest childhood days, “*Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*” However, words can and do hurt - and each one of us know this to be true. I guarantee that the hurtful words spoken to us and about us stick with us for a long, long time.

The prophet cries, “*All like sheep have gone astray.*” The Apostle Paul heaps on top, “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” St. Bernard adds later, “*Every corner of my heart is a cage of unclean birds.*” Even one so filled with God's spirit as St. Augustine, for all his belief in the grace of God, died in tears and terror, eyes fixed upon the penitential psalms. We have all learned well this litany of self-condemnation, taught to us by a world - and too often by church experience - which tells us who we are and create us in the image of ones who are miserable and wretched.

The old words of the baptismal liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer welcomes the candidate to the font of living water with these words, “*For as much as you have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God . . .*” In other words, considering how sinful you are, you are lucky to be here! You have a primal defect, which we will fix right here at this baptismal font.

With all these words embedded in consciousness, tradition, and scripture itself, we need to hear and embrace a holy and different story line for baptism, which comes from a more ancient place that I would like for us to follow. It is love song. This love song is older, deeper, wiser and stronger. It comes from the "universal" Book of Common Prayer known as the Holy Bible. In the early church, this song was sung at every person's baptism. It washes away all the familiar, hurtful and hateful refrains of words of the other words. The song is written in I Peter, 2:9-10 and proclaims:

*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's chosen people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received God's mercy. (I Peter 2:9-10)*

**Of course - this is who you are!** Our God sees us as chosen, as royal, as holy, as God's own beloved! Of course, God has embraced us with mercy and empowered us to be merciful and just! Of course, God tells us this! Of course this is true, because out of God's infinite love, Mark 1:12 tells Jesus as he is rising from the water of baptism in the River Jordan: "**You are my *agapetos* - "my dear one, my beloved one" with you I am `eudokeo' (yoo-dok-eh'-o) - "pleasured in, well-pleased, or delighted" in you.**

God clearly says, "**My dearest one, I am delighted in you!**"

Who tells you who you are? Who calls you by name? Who tells you that you are dear and precious? Who tells you that you are delightful? The same one who created you and called you into life. The same one who empowered you with breath and hope and mercy and kindness and delight! The Holy One of Israel, the Almighty, the God of the Universe, the God of Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Rebekah, the God of Joseph and Mary, the God and ever-loving parent of Jesus

Christ! **Our God tells us this.**

**"You are my dear ones. In you I delight!"** These are God's words. When out of jealousy, unkindness, cruelty, fear or insecurity, others may call you names and utter all sorts of unkindness about you, **remember who you are.** They do not define you. You are named and claimed; chosen and called by God! You are sons and daughters of royalty! You are holy ones! You are dear and delightful ones!

### **Remember who you are and whose you are!**

At the font of baptism, in the living water and spirit of baptismal grace, God calls each of us by name. Each of our names means something. As you know, when I baptize a child or an adult, I tell them what their name means before I place the water upon them. I do this, because each of you has been claimed by a spiritual power that has come through your parents to you. Each of you has been named for a purpose and with a purpose. Each of you is set apart by your baptism to live into a life of love and holiness. Each of you is precious. Each of you is a gift!

**Jonah is a double dove!** He is sweet beyond measure. He is boldly and beautifully blessed today in his baptism - but, each of you is boldly and beautifully blessed, too. Each of you is a child of promise. Each of you is special. Each of you is well pleasing and delightful. Each of you, in baptismal grace, has been transformed.

**And this transformation is immediate.** We are told in Mark 1:4-12 that when Jesus rose from his baptism in the River Jordan, **immediately** he saw the heavens open and the dove descend upon him and **immediately** he heard God speak the words of favor and love. **Immediately** he was driven into the wilderness and there tested by the devil.

*"Wait," we say, "I like the immediate transformation part, but what is this additional part about immediately finding*

*ourselves in the desert and immediately facing temptation in the face of chaos and despair? Could you run that past me, again - or preferably - leave it out of the text and out of my experience - post baptism?"* Well, I wish I could. I wish I could leave out the temptation and the struggle and the pain - but often it is immediate.

Years ago, I baptized two children whose parents had returned to church having been apart from a community of faith throughout the 10 years of their marriage. Three days after reaffirming their own baptism and celebrating the baptism of their son and daughter, the woman, who was seven months pregnant with her third child, lost her child, who died minutes after premature birth. It was terrible.

I was out of town when the call came. As my family came back to Columbus, I rushed to the hospital. Our friend (my friend) and my mentor and colleague, Rev. Keene Lebold, had gone ahead of me to be with the family in their grief and loss. When I arrived, I wondered what I would hear and how I would find them. Would they blame God for their terrible loss? Would their fragile, new connection with the church break and disintegrate?

It was not long after arriving and offering prayers that the man said to me, *"Rev. Tim, even though we just joined the church a few days ago, I feel so blessed by God. I do not know what we would have done without you, the church, and our rediscovery of faith! God is so good to us!"* I was astounded. What followed in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead were a deepening friendship and a devotion to faith and life in Christ coming from this family that I have rarely seen in anyone. Out of the immediate transformation of baptism, immediate tragedy struck, but out of the tragedy came sustaining transformation.

Who are you? Who has told you who you are? Your parents, your children, your boss, your job, your friends, your school, your bank account? If you allow others to tell you who

you are, they will be very happy to tell you. However, that is a dangerous way to go. Through your baptism, you, as a Christian first and finally, learn who you are.

**Baptism is the rite of identity.** Baptism asserts rather than argues. Baptism proclaims rather than explains. Baptism involves rather than describes. When you ask, in your darkest moments, in your dark nights of the soul, *"Who, in God's name, am I?"* baptism will have you feel the water dripping down your head and you will say, *"I am a child of God. I belong to God who chooses me, names me, and claims me in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of his dearly beloved, deeply delightful son, my savior, Jesus Christ as royalty, as a holy one, as wonderful, as light in the darkness!"*

Part of our problem with baptism in the Christian church and with living as Christians is that we have misplaced the action of baptism. Like almost everyone else in our modern world, we have put too much stress on doubt, striving, misdeeds, questions, and aspirations, and too little stress upon God. I know I fall prey to talking too much about human failings, and not enough about the power and presence of God. We preachers tell people to get out there and live right, do right, be right. One member of my old church used to call this, "be good" sermons. It sounds good and sincere in our self-help and achievement-oriented society. But, truth be told, such teaching and preaching does not sound like Good News. The Good News of the Gospel, the Good News of our Baptism into Christ is that **we are right with God**. We have arrived. We are not miserable wretches inching our way into God's good graces. We are royalty and have, by the grace of God, already received seats at the feast table in the Kingdom!

**It is ALL ABOUT God's grace.** We know that all by ourselves we stumble and fall. But in God's eyes, we are loved, chosen, adopted and anointed. We are a royal priesthood! (From William Willimon's *Remember Who You Are*).

In his book, *The Gospel for the Person Who Has Everything*, Willimon tells the story about a young friend of his, age four, who was asked on his fifth birthday, what kind of party he wanted to have. Clayton said, *"I want everybody to be a king or a queen."*

So Clayton and his mother went about fashioning a score of silver crowns with cardboard and aluminum foil and purple robes (crepe paper) and royal scepters (a stick painted gold). On the day of the party, as guests arrived, they were given their royal crown, robe and scepter and were thus dressed as kings and queens. It was a regal sight - kings and queens filled the room! Everyone had a wonderful time and after they had all eaten their cake and ice cream, they had a procession up to the end of the block and back again. Overall, it was a royal and wonderful day.

That evening, as his mother was tucking Clayton into bed, she asked him what he wished for when he blew out the candles on his birthday cake. He said, *"I wished that everyone in the whole world could be a king or a queen, not just on my birthday, but every day."*

Well, Clayton, baptism shows that something very much like that happened one day at a place called Calvary, and then in a garden three days later. We, who would often feel like "nobodies," became and remain "somebodies." Those who had been told they were "nobodies" became God's people. Through baptismal boldness, we are immediately transformed. We have become kings and queens - a royal priesthood of believers in Christ. Thanks be to God - to whom all the glory is given! Amen.

