

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 9, 2010, Epiphany 1, dedicated to Ruth and Perry Silverman and Rev. Harold Steindam, who celebrates 20 years of faithful service as senior pastor of Westerville Community UCC this week, and always to the glory of God!

“Home in the Waters of Baptism”

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

**(Part I of VIII in the series
“Windows of the Soul”)**

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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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The Wizard of Oz is a film filled with magnificent imagery, mythology, classic music, colorful sets and illumination all wrapped around themes of good overcoming evil and belief, fellowship and friendship connecting us through all the trials and tribulations of life. From Kansas to Oz, Dorothy and Toto are carried away by a twister of epic proportions. When they land on the Wicked Witch of the East, their journey home takes them on a yellow brick road through fields of corn and poppies, dark, haunted forests, the Wicked Witch of the West’s frightening castle, and even into the city of Oz and the inner chambers of “The Great and Powerful Oz.” In the end, Dorothy discovers what she knew in the beginning, “There is No Place Like Home.”

Through the years, I have been reminded of this image of homecoming every time my friend and our choirmaster and organist emeritus, G. Dene Barnard, ventures out on his “busman’s holiday” through the sanctuaries of Great Britain and beyond. He goes each year with long time friends to visit Europe’s cathedrals and play their great organs. He returns time and again speaking of sound and stained glass. He says, “I have seen the great cathedrals and I believe our windows are as glorious as any I have seen.” *There is no place like home.*

Today, we enter into the journey of Epiphany. This is the season of God’s light and love discovered in Jesus Christ. What better time to begin our celebration of the 80th year of life faith at 444 East Broad Street than with the stories that surround us in stained glass. In this season, we will cover the landscape of Jesus’ ministry and end on a Mountain of Transfiguration where Jesus is changed into pure light. Between now and then, I pray we will discover “there is no place like home,” the home we find in our sacred space at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ.

Our journey begins bathed in the blue light of the Jeffrey window. I remind you this window’s name came from the people of First Church to the Jeffrey family. Through the legacy and love of Celia Jeffrey, a quarter of a million dollars was given for the construction of our “Cathedral of Grace” in the late 1920s. Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Washington Gladden and built to the glory of God, the congregation was so thankful for the Jeffrey’s lead gift covering 25% of the cost of building First Church that this window was dedicated to the family’s good name.

In the Jeffrey Window we receive the blessing of God’s *indirect* Light. Because it is a north side window, this window’s colors are constant and consistent, not dramatically changed day to day and season to season. Likewise, Jesus Christ is our constant and consistent life-light, day in and day out, year in and year out.

To preach, to pray to celebrate the sacraments before this window is a blessing beyond belief. To receive blessings, sacraments and God's word here can also be a remarkable experience. On any given Sunday, any one of you (even all of you!) can drift away into the blues of this glorious stained glass and be suffused by the story of Jesus. His presence is everywhere to be found in the stained glass before you. From birth to death; from life in Galilee and Jerusalem to ascension and glory, Jesus is "all in all" in our Jeffrey window. Surrounded by the four gospel writers, he is first, teaching and healing. But he also is preaching, helping, chastising, holding children and saving lives.

For today, we begin with Jesus' baptism.

Jesus goes out with the multitudes into the desert. There in the River Jordan he finds his second cousin, John the Baptizer, dunking sinners.

Let's remember, this place was teeming with sinners - faulty, sorry, guilty human beings - who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the kinds of things they were guilty of - drunk driving, (mail fraud), bad checks, petty larceny, assault. (Some were poor and had come because they had been told by priests that their poverty was caused by something wrong inside of them). Some were notorious sinners and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had all come to be cleaned. They all knew they were dirty. (reference - Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, pp. 33-34)

Jesus shows up and gets in line with them. He wasn't famous. No one knew anything about him. He hadn't committed any miracles yet. He hadn't told any parables. He hadn't saved humanity yet. He simply stood in line waiting his turn. John recognized him as he entered the water. To the rest

of the newly redeemed and waiting unredeemed sinners by the river, it looked like John and Jesus were just talking. But, attention was drawn to Jesus as he emerged from the waters with the heavens torn apart, a dove descending upon him, and a voice clearly saying from heaven, "*This is my son, the Beloved One, in whom I am well pleased.*" (Ibid).

The voice of God from heaven? What is going on? Now the controversy began. "*What is he doing here?*" the others must have wondered. What was the son of God doing submitting himself to a scruffy character like John in a crowd teeming with sinners?

The Christian church has never rested easily with the baptism of Jesus. Each of the gospel writers make us uneasy as they tell the story. Mark is characteristically brief. Matthew tells us that John tried to talk Jesus out of baptism. Luke will not even come out and say John did it. John's gospel is most curious of all. He bears witness that he saw the dove descend, but he does not mention anything about baptism at all. (Ibid, p.35)

Jesus would not have been baptized by John if he'd had political handlers and PR people. While it was okay to appear to be *a friend to sinners* and kind and loving to the misbegotten, it was not politically wise to be mistaken as one of them. Imagine the mayor of Columbus, or our new governor or our president lining up with criminals seeking redemption for who knows what offenses. Everyone would wonder, what has he done wrong?

If Jesus had had a Rahm Emmanuel or a Carl Rove, these political handlers would have encouraged him to be slapping backs and grabbing hands and helping the newly redeemed out of the water - with a smile. But, they would never have allowed a photo-op down in the river alongside the sinners, under the water dirtied by the sweat of petty criminals and thieves! It would not have been prudent.

Even if Jesus were innocent, even his intentions were good and pure, this scene was ruinous to his reputation. Who would believe that he was actually there because he cared about people and refused to separate himself from them? I am sure folks would think: He must have done something wrong. Maybe it was a tiny, teeny thing. But he had to be there to clear his conscience (and perhaps his name). Then he could go on to great things.

Do you see the problem?

We spend a lot of time in the church talking about God's love for sinners, but we sure do have a lot of trouble seeing ourselves as one of those sinners. God forbid someone mistakes us for a sinner. So we try to stay away from those who are unclean. Guilt by association and all that. Jesus was not concerned about "all that."

He didn't have our issues. He understood that "God with us," *Immanuel*, means God being with us as poor sinners in the river. It means God being with us in the jail cells facing someone who has committed a crime according to the state and seeks forgiveness according to God. It means God being with us when we have HIV/AIDS and lie dying alone. It means God being with us in the pain of divorce. It means God being with us in rehabilitation from drug and alcohol abuse. It means God being with us when we have run away from home and need parental love and forgiveness or when we as parents have seemingly given up on one or more of our children. It means God being with us in the tornados and hurricanes of life and their aftermath. It means God being with us as we cry out to city council or county commissioners calling them to a deeper consciousness of remembering the poor in our midst. It means God being with us when we stand up for justice for gays, lesbians, bi-sexual or transgendered persons, even though we are not ourselves are not gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered. And it means God being with us as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered persons when we find the courage to step into the sunshine of God's love and light -

knowing that we are loved by God and God is (TRULY) “WITH US!”

It means God being with us down in the river, in the flesh, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us.

Why do we baptize and seek baptism? Because, we need it! God calls us into the water of baptism not because we are holy, but because we need holiness. And we come: some of us brave, some of fearful; some of us weak, some of us strong; some of us well, some of hurting intensely; some of us heroes and successes or once not so long ago knew ourselves to be and some of us who can't seem to get anything right.

We come to the water. We seek the Holy Spirit. We ask once again for God to make dead to sin, and alive to grace in God's name. And so today, I appeal to one more time: remember your baptism and keep it holy.

As sinners, redeemed in the love of forgiveness and grace of God, known to us in Christ, it is nice to know we are home already. After all, there is “no place like home.” Amen.

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