

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 10, 2010, Epiphany I, the Baptism of Our Lord, dedicated to Kirsten Roche and Luke Ahrens to honor their engagement, and to Noah Stephen Kirker on his baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“The Splash Zone”

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

+++++

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.

+++++

When my oldest son Luke was 4 years old, Susan and I took him to the Worthington Pool to begin swimming lessons. We wanted him to get a head start on life in the water and felt the time had arrived. He was comfortable with water, but had plenty to learn, including rudimentary strokes. Trying not to show any personal fear (which I genuinely had from a near drowning experience in the ocean as a child), I brought Luke pool side and placed him in the care of the young instructor who seemed awfully young to me. She took his hand and off they went to the water. He took to the water swimmingly.

As I was watching intently, one mother asked, “How old is your son?”

I answered, “He is four . . . How about your child?”

She answered, “She is two. But, I wish we had started earlier. She is so far behind.”

Rather stunned, I responded, “She’s behind at two? When do

you think she should have started?”

She answered, “Before she started walking. Maybe 10 months, or sooner.”

I thought she was overzealous, to say the least. So, I checked it out with Luke’s swimming teacher after class.

“Absolutely,” she said. “We like to get them before they walk. We more or less throw them in the water. They already know what do to do. When they are that little they follow their instincts and behave naturally. Don’t forget, a baby is in water nine months before they are born. At that age babies are still very trusting and allow you do to more with them.”

Babies do what comes naturally and they are more trusting than older children. It made sense. It was a revelation.

Trust is something so basic to life. Psychologist Erik Erikson believes trust is developed within the first few weeks of life. He sees trust as a by-product of the relationship between a mother and her child. During his or her first weeks of life, a baby learns that the world is a trustworthy or untrustworthy place. When a baby goes to sleep at night and cries out, will someone be there when he awakens? He or she must think, “Will I be abandoned? Will someone be there for me? Will anyone hear my cry and come?” Parental patterns develop that show a child the world is someplace to be trusted and not to be feared.

Conversely, if someone does not come, the child learns that the world is not a trustworthy place. It is the rituals of daily meeting and greeting that set in place a pattern of learning safety and trust or uncaring and lack of trust.

Adding to Erikson’s view of trust and trustworthiness, I believe that trust is established not only when we are there at the right time, but when we let go at the right time, too. Loving parents know not

only when to show up, be present and hold on but also when to depart and let go. Some of us cling to our children in stifling, unhealthy and overprotective ways. What may at first look like a firm parental hand in the matter, may be too much – a parent who possesses the child and binds them in such a way that are unable to grow and develop on their own.

Sometimes I think we cling to, protect and possess our children out of our own lack of trust in them, ourselves, our world – and even our God. It takes a loving, trusting parent to know when to let go and coax our children to venture forth into the deep waters of life. This is the supreme test of parental love and trust. (Drawn from William H. Willimon, *Remember Who You Are*, The Upper Room, Nashville, 1980, pp. 43-45).

As a swimming coach in the waters of baptism I can tell you: When parents bring their children to waters of baptism, as Christina and David Kirker have today with Noah Stephen, they are present at the right place at the right time. Gathered with the children of our church seated by the font of blessing, surrounded by a community of faith that is ready to embrace their son and teach him to “swim in the faith,” along with the greatest swimming instructor of all, Jesus of Nazareth presenting the rules of the pool with these words: “Let the children come unto me and do not hinder them, for I tell you the kingdom of God belongs to them. Surely, if you do not enter the kingdom of God like a child, you will NEVER enter it” - I promise you they come to the right place of ritual meeting and greeting.

But, there is the other factor of parental love at work. It is this: Christina and David have entered “the splash zone,” and it is their time for “letting go and letting God” get to work with their child. That also is happening in each and every baptism.

With only a few months of life under his bib, I know it is hard to imagine Noah swimming already. But David and Christina, with your declared promises before God and all of us, you have turned him over to God! You have had enough faith to say “I entrust you to God’s

eternal care, Noah.”

This is a powerful and trusting act! One for which you will receive blessing upon blessing as you raise your son in this community of faith. Along the way, the saints of God at First Church will hold him, feed him, burp him, change him, teach him, sing with him, dance with him, fish with him, grow in laughter and love and faith with him. In time we will confirm him into faith and travel to do God’s mission on behalf of those who are suffering and in need. It happens so fast, and it all begins right after you enter the “splash zone” – trust, let go and let God work God’s wonders in his life.

Last Sunday, the little swimmer I mentioned earlier, my little 4-year-old Luke, came forward to receive communion with his fiancée. This little “wunderkind” who was nurtured in the waters of baptism almost 23 years ago and tossed in the waters of Worthington Pools ONLY 18 short years ago, is ready to take another leap. He is ready to make a lifelong commitment in marriage. (Once again, his father and mother are being called upon to trust God and let go). While walking in the light of God, embraced by his brothers and sisters in Christ here and elsewhere in his life, he learned to swim – and more – he learned to trust and have faith in God to guide him through life’s challenges.

Noah will learn all of this and more, given time. It is a revelation of God. Believe me. I know. Here at First Church, I have been the celebrant over the past 10 years 163 times in the baptismal “splash zone” of faith!

Today is our first Sunday of Epiphany, the season of revelations.

Luke 3:15-17,21-22 presents our first revelation of the season: John the Baptist is **not** the messiah. While this may seem self-evident to you, the people gathered by edge of the River Jordan think they are in line to get “God’s autograph of eternity” splashed on them by John, whom they believe to be the messiah. The people are alive with expectation. They want and need to trust in a future hope, in a

messianic salvation which will deliver them from the suffering of their time.

At this point in history, the sense of accumulated wrongs and the backlog of unkept promises is so powerful that people hope beyond hope that John is the one who will change all this. With the revelation that John is NOT the one, it becomes clear that someone else must be the one. But before we make the second revelation (which every Sunday school child knows is Jesus), we have to pause and consider why it is so important that not being the messiah also is a revelation.

Sometimes God reveals God's light in the "negative" of the photograph. In other words, God shows God's self to us in what is not there. If John, who eats locusts and wild honey, dresses simply and undistinguished, preaches fire and brimstone calling for repentance of sins and renewal of the spirit, if this man is NOT the messiah, then what does the messiah look like?

Luke's gospel is great on this one! **The Messiah looks like one of us.** That's right. Luke tells us that "ALL THE PEOPLE" (including Jesus) had been baptized. Nothing yet had happened. Then as Jesus was praying, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit Comes down and the voice of God says, "This is my beloved son; in you I am well pleased." This double proclamation sets Jesus apart. First, from Psalm 2:7, "you are my beloved son," God sets him apart as anointed. Second, from Isaiah 42:1, "in whom I am well pleased," God draws people's attention to the suffering servant of the prophet Isaiah. The power and glory of the anointed one includes suffering and a cross. In his baptism, Jesus receives the paradoxical blessing of chosen-ness for suffering and glory. In that moment, we discover why he is so special. His destiny is wrapped-up in power and glory; suffering and cross. Again, we receive yet another revelation of God.

And here is yet another revelation to carry out of the "splash zone" and into this week: The Messiah looks like us AND **because** he embodies the suffering and glory of God. As such he embraces us and relates to us in our struggles and suffering and in our celebrations and

glory. He cries with us when we suffer loss and hardship. He rejoices with us when we conquer life's challenges.

Let go and let God in Jesus Christ be with you on this, Noah's baptismal day, and your day of baptismal renewal. And Noah, welcome to "the splash zone." I believe you will find the water refreshing and renewing! Amen.