

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 11, 2009, the Baptism of Our Lord, dedicated to Carmen Alice Fanning on her baptismal day, to everyone baptized into Christian faith, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Remember Your Baptism”**

### **Mark 1:4-11**

+++++

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.

+++++

Christians are not born. Christians are made.

To become a Christian requires a number of things. It requires renouncing. It requires dying. It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ (not in some Christian denomination or belief structure). It requires accepting the Holy Spirit in your life. It requires receiving water and that same Holy Spirit you just proclaimed you accepted. In the end, being made a Christian is about water and the Holy Spirit.

To be made a Christian, each one of us must renounce the power of evil. Make no mistake about it. Evil is powerful. In his book, *The People of the Lie*, psychologist M. Scott Peck describes evil as the state of chaos created by people in this world. Ones who are evil and create and sustain an environment of chaos are good at it and determined to create it and sustain it. They are good at planting seeds of doubt about those who are good and loving and grace-filled. They usually present themselves as good – sometimes better than others.

But, make no mistake about it, while they rationalize their actions, their intentions are to tear down and destroy. To truly become a Christian, each one of us must renounce evil and seek the freedom of new life in Christ – an ancient and radical action!

To be made a Christian, each one of us must die. Some of us don't care for language of evil and death. But, each of us must acknowledge that every day in some way, we all face a little dying – dying to ourselves, to our egos, to our ways of doing things. It means dying to our carefully-constructed belief systems about ourselves and about other people. It also means dying to the belief system that the actual end of life is only that and nothing more.

No one likes to die, even though every one of us is one step closer to death each day that we are alive. So, for those considering becoming Christians, this “dying stuff” can cause us to drag our feet. But, if you can see dying as part of God's plan of preparation for eternal life in Christ, dying to self, dying to the old ways of gracelessness and lovelessness are really helpful! To truly become a Christian, each one of us must die to sin and become alive in Christ Jesus.

To be made a Christian, each one of us must proclaim faith in Jesus Christ, not in any denomination, creed or church covenant. Ultimately, to be made a Christian in baptism means your faith, allegiance and life is committed to Jesus. Anyone who tries to tell you any differently is lying.

This morning, I baptized Carmen Alice into the “Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” not into “First Church.” None of you should ever be baptized into a congregation. If you are, it is a cult. Make no mistake about that. The family of faith that welcomes has a street address and a city, state and Zip code (so to speak), but the name on the mailbox should always be “Jesus Christ.” The water flowing down from the top of your head to your toes should always be flowing in the name of the “Father, the Son and Holy Spirit.”

For folks who are very ecumenical, this very consoling. But, for

folks who are more concerned about their Congregationalism and about their street address and Zip code than whose name is on their forehead, this might seem troubling. God knows us by name, not by address. We are children of God completely, not by degree. To be made a Christian means that we need to acknowledge (and perhaps struggle with) others whose identity in Christ is vastly different from ours.

I used to say of the late Jerry Falwell, *“He and I are brothers in Christ. I am in relationship with him whether I like it or not because we have both been baptized into Jesus Christ.”* There are those in the Christian communion who have literally spit on my name and called me a heretic and worse. But, I am in relationship to them. Like people on a chain gang, Christ has bound us together through our baptism into him.

Like it or not, the same could be said for a host of people in your life whose names pop into your mind, but whose message or treatment of you is far from your heart or the heart of God. If you struggle with this, imagine how God must feel! As a parent of all children of the earth, God is in relationship to all of us, no matter how abusive we are of God’s name and being. That’s why I am glad I am not God.

But be at peace if you are in Christ Jesus. And remember, he doesn’t care about your address. He only cares about you and your identity as one who seeks to follow him. To truly become a Christian, each one of us must accept the name of Jesus Christ and then dedicate our lives to living in his way (As an aside – during Lent my sermon series is entitled “Jesus.” I will explore how to live in Christ throughout the Lenten season, beginning February 25).

To be made a Christian, each one of us must accept the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Today, all of us have been washed – not only by the renewing waters of baptism – but by the power of the Holy Spirit. At Sea World, when you go to the performances of the whales, dolphins, sea lions and walruses, signs near the edge of the pool read “Splash Zone.” You can pretty much guarantee, if you are in a “Splash

Zone” you will get wet.

Today, we have all been in a “splash zone!” We have been showered with water and the Holy Spirit. We have gotten wet! We have been awakened by the Holy Spirit. Our eyes have been opened. Our hearts have been opened. We have been touched by the water of baptism and by the Holy Spirit! The Spirit moves where it will. It cannot be pinned down. It cannot be told what to do or where to go. The Spirit is our inspiration for mission, for stewardship, for our walk in faith! The Holy Spirit showers us with love and grace! To truly become a Christian, each one of us must enter the “splash zone” of faith and prepare to get washed by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Just this week, Helen Spears brought James McBride’s book, *The Color of Water*, to my attention. I am so grateful. McBride tells the story of his mother Ruth, who was raised in the home of an Orthodox rabbi in the South, then married to an African-American man who takes her to Brooklyn, where she raised 12 children. Upon leaving her father’s home, her Orthodox family prays the *Shiva* (the Jewish ritual of mourning), because she is dead to them. Ruth embraces Christianity and the black parishes of her husband, who is a preacher.

Ruth places great emphasis on religion as she raises her children. The source of this book's title appears when James remembers asking his mother a question about her race. He often asks her about her light skin and she dances around the answer throughout his childhood. One day, James asks, “*What color is God's spirit?*” Ruth replies, “*It doesn't have a color. God is the color of water.*”

Ruth's statement that “*God is the color of water*” succinctly captures her attitudes toward race and religion. She believes that race occupies a secondary role to goodness and achievement. She believes that no matter one's race, hard work determines worth. She believes that God loves all races equally, and that goodness and devotion, not a certain race or class, make people worthy of God's grace.

When Ruth says she thinks of God as “the color of water,” for her

God is not black or white. God is not of one race or another, but of all races and none. While Ruth embraces both black and white people, she knows that prejudice is widespread and intense. God's spirit, on the other hand, welcomes people of all races, sexual orientations and backgrounds.

I share this story on "God as the color of water" as I close because I believe we should come to baptism and faith in Christ bearing in mind the unity of God's spirit and the oneness of God's love.

Let us remember that to become a Christian requires a number of things. It requires renouncing. It requires dying. It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ. It requires accepting the Holy Spirit in your life. It requires receiving water and that same Holy Spirit you just proclaimed you accepted. In the end, being made a Christian is about water and the Holy Spirit.

Truly, to become a Christian, we need to embrace and be embraced by our God, who is the color of water. Today, we welcomed Carmen into Christ. Today, we renewed our baptismal vows. Today, as people who are made into Christians, let us remember our baptism and keep it holy. Amen.