

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, First Sunday after Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord, January 13, 2013, dedicated to Julian Edward Nunez and Kyle Patrick Storey on their baptismal day, to Kevin Jones on his first Sunday among us as our Music Minister, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Baptism Matters”**

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

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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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On Thursday of last week, the 2013 Oscar nominations were released in Hollywood. The “Oscar Season” has officially begun. In this year of *Les Miserables*, some of us will begin to sing our favorite nominations, (creating “misery” or “less misery” others depending on our voices), and some of us will compare and contrast the greatness of a number of great films, others of us will quietly head to the movies to see the films and actors nominated.

But how many of us will be asking, “Who is Oscar?” Well, the Internet which has the correct answer (and many incorrect answers) for everything, tells us that Oscar –the golden statuette with the sword standing on top of film – has a *nickname* of unknown origins.

The most popular story about the name's origin involves then Academy of Arts and Sciences librarian and future executive director, Margaret Herrick. The story goes that Herrick, upon seeing the statuette sitting on a table exclaimed, "It looks just like my Uncle Oscar!" The name stuck and it has been called by that name ever since. That was in 1939. Another common story involves

actress and two-time Academy Award winner Bette Davis, who reportedly named it after her ex-husband, Harmon Oscar Nelson, Jr. But columnist Sidney Skolsky, perhaps the first to use the name in print, claimed that the name came from an old music hall joke, "Will you have a cigar, Oscar?" "Origin unknown" is the final answer.

Like Oscar, the character known as "Simon the Magician" magically appears in our text today. His origin is MOSTLY unknown. We know that Phillip has been preaching and baptizing with the Holy Spirit and Simon has been working the same crowds with his magic. As Simon Peter goes into Samaria baptizing the people in the name of Jesus, he encounters the rather famous magician of Samaria named "Simon the Magician" or "Simon the Great." Simon draws big crowds and mesmerizes them with his magic and trickery. He was known to "work signs and miracles" (Acts 8:13).

But magic and the work of the Holy Spirit are different. They may appear to be similar to the naked eye, but our text perceives a difference between the two. Magic is meant to deceive the eye and trick gullible audiences, while the miracles of Phillip and Peter point to God's healing power. While magic brings attention and money to Simon the Magician, the miracles of God bring focus to one in whose name they occur – Jesus Christ, son of God. Plus, there is no admission cost for miracles. Like grace – they are a FREE gift from God.

Simon the Magician wants to buy the power he sees displayed. He offers Peter money for the miracles. Peter rebukes the magician declaring that the Holy Spirit is not for sale. Peter calls him to repentance. Simon repents and turns from his ways.

Unlike the golden statute of Oscar with unknown origin, who returns every year to be grasped in the hands of Oscar winners, our similarly unknown Simon vanishes from the Bible – but not before he repents of his sins and is baptized into Christ, thus turning to a new way of living.

Our lives are filled with people who appear ever so briefly and somewhat mysteriously in our midst, make a mark for a moment, and disappear. Their origins may be unclear to us. We may not remember their names or faces. But something they say or do has a lasting impact. (“Hey, that looks like Uncle Oscar!”). They become “angels unaware” in our lives. They are most likely not magicians or sorcerers. But they matter in our lives.

I think of the English professor who told Theodor Seuss Geisel that between his writing and his awful art he would amount to nothing more than a children’s story teller. Is there anyone here who does not know the name – Dr. Seuss? Many famous children’s books followed from the pen and artwork of this young man and now his birthday, March 2, has been adopted as the annual date for National “*Read Across America Day*,” an initiative on reading created by the National Education Association.

When interviewed, Ted Geisel always thanked his professor for the intended “put down” that propelled him to fame and fortune. Now I can’t recall the name of the professor. How about you? Can you think of those whose observations and (perhaps negative) commentary have had positive (and perhaps unintended) consequences in your life? How have they turned you around – pointing you in new direction?

I think of baptism into Christ in this way. It is simple. It is straightforward. And it really matters. It sets people apart for God. It can turn you around.

Whether in Kyle’s case coming as an adult after study, education and decision, or like Julian as a baby with mom and dad speaking on behalf of an intended future, baptism matters. Baptism sets us apart. In baptism, by water and spirit, we an unseen God meets us in the midst of a seen community and claims us for Christ. We make declarations of faith and then we live into them. We may not remember the name of the one who baptizes us. But we will always remember in whose name we were baptized. That is what really matters in baptism.

A friend of mine has grown children who are struggling with their relationship with God and the church right now. I wish they had been here to meet Kyle Storey. They would have been deeply touched. As she wonders what will become of her adult children struggling with faith and life, I said to her, *"They have been named and claimed **by** Christ and **for** Christ. In him they will be always be shielded and protected. They belong to him. He will watch over them. Trust him to be their ever-present help in times of trouble."*

It isn't magic. It is our faith. And ours is a faith that is conceived and born out of the creative and loving energy of God. It is proclaimed and lived out in a beautiful and sometimes unnerving community of faith. It is supported and nurtured in the communion of saints and sinners (some of whose names we know and some who are unknown to us). Our faith is real, and sometimes messy, and always nervy and mixed in the stuff of life. It is blessed by the power of the Holy Spirit. But our faith is never to be confused magic.

If you don't believe me, believe God. In the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to St. Luke, Jesus is named and claimed in the water of Mary's womb. He is born in the creative mix and mess of life. He is baptized in the muddy waters of the Jordan River and steps out of the waters and is named and claimed by God who speaks to Jesus quietly, while he is praying (not in the midst of the crowd with the sky breaking open as Matthew and Mark say): ***"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am really happy with you."***

I believe God feels the same way about Kyle and Julian. He speaks as lovingly and quietly, *"Kyle, You are my son. Julian, you are my son. You are my beloved. I am really happy with you."* I feel this is true for each one of us – and those who we worry about, believing they have fallen out of the grace and love of God. Each of us is beautiful and beloved and blessed by God. I ask that in this moment, each of you say your name. Repeat after me, "\_\_\_\_\_, you are my child. You are my beloved. I am really, really happy with you."

You are known by God. You are loved by God. You are named and claimed by God. In your baptism, and in the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, you are beautiful and beloved. You have put on Christ this day, sing alleluia and rejoice! You have been baptized in him, sing alleluia and rejoice. This is not magic. But, in the miraculous love of God, it is true. Your baptism really matters.

Remember your baptism and keep in holy. Amen.

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