

“Water AND Spirit”

Genesis 1”1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

January 7, 2024

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

“Water AND Spirit”

Genesis 1”1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

A Communion/Baptismal Sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 7, 2024, The Baptism of our Lord, dedicated to all the newborns, babies, infants, children, teens and adults who have been baptized into Christ Jesus by water and the Spirit at First Church since we formed as a congregation in 1852 and always to the glory of God!

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

+++++

On a day like this (but about 50 degrees warmer), Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. The place was swarming with sinners – fallen, sorry, guilty human beings – who had come in hope of John the Baptizer cleaning up their lives and turning things around for them. The daily newspaper, the nightly news, Facebook, Tic Toc, Instagram all tells us what most of them had done – passing bad checks, driving drunk, unarmed robbery, failure to pay child support, really bad dancing, and jokes and commentary that hurt people and so much more. Some of them would have been known to you from their pictures at the post office or appearing on nightly news in the “Crime Stoppers” section. Some were hardened criminals looking for a shortcut to heaven’s gate. Others were guilty of crimes of the heart which only they and God knew about. But none of them lived with illusions of innocence. They were all there because they knew they were

covered in dirt of their lives that they had dumped on themselves. They had come to get cleaned-up.

Then this one guy shows up who is completely different from the rest. It's Jesus of Nazareth. He isn't famous yet. In Mark's gospel, there are no accounts of his birth or early childhood. His life begins with this baptism, so no one clears a path when he makes his way to the water. He takes a number and waits in line.

Later, after John has baptized him and the heavens have torn apart and a voice from heaven makes it clear who he is (THE SON OF GOD!) – you better believe the crowd looks at him differently. Who is this guy? What is **HE** doing here (John and the others want an answer to this!)? What is this sinless dude doing in a seething sea of sin by the river's edge? To say it is uncomfortable is an understatement. A pure-hearted saint in the sea of sinners! It gets edgy by the river's edge. The others begin to look at him – and each other – differently.

You see, I believe the church has never been really comfortable with Jesus' baptism. He was pure and innocent. He didn't need to clean up his act. His was the cleanest act in human history. Nevertheless, he made a choice to identify with all of us who need to clean up our act – some of us need it every single day. He humbles himself to be with us, even though he isn't like us – on the inside. By doing this, he gives shape, form, and meaning to his own name – Immanuel – “God with us.” By wading in the water of the Jordan River, by receiving baptism in the arms and hands of John, Jesus adopts us as his family, his siblings, just as God had done through him on behalf of all creation.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are connected with God and Christ throughout time. Our adoptive connection comes through Christ's body and blood at communion AND through the water and spirit of baptism. It is our **TGNA – Through Grace Newly Adopted** – not our

DNA which makes us who we are, because in Christ, we already know whose we are. It is always important to remember that all of us are Christians by adoption. **Every single one of us is adopted in this family. None of us have a bloodline – except through His blood. None of us is pedigreed. We are all here by the Grace of God ALONE.**

Our job is simple – really. We have made some resolutions – some promises. We are called to live into the promises we make at baptism. We are called to confess, step into the waters of grace, get wet, be different – at least for a while – certainly more than for a few seconds. We are called by God to live our promises at Baptism with the audacity of hope and faith. We are called by God to renounce evil and accept new life in Christ. We are called by God to proclaim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We are called to live a good life, a life which is exemplified by our faith in Christ. This includes deepening our knowledge and experience of our Christian faith, serving the world in God’s spirit, doing justice and loving others more fully. It also includes instructing our children and grandchildren to do the same so that one day they can be baptized or live into their baptismal vows.

These are promises made. All of us are witnesses to one another’s promises. All of us participate. All of us are called to the water – especially knowing that none of us are perfect. None of us have figured out everything about everything. All of us are **TGNA - Through Grace Newly Adopted.**

My friends, Baptism is not only about “watching.” It is about wading in!

Baptism is not done on the sidelines, in a corner – it’s done in the center of the field, in the heart of the sanctuary, in the heart of our life together. It is done together because Christianity is not a spectator sport. When we sing “Alleluias,” when we sing about putting on Christ in baptism, our perfect singing and harmonizing are beautiful – but that is only the beginning of this story. Baptism is really about the risky business of promises made and promises kept. When our children ask us the meaning of something related

to Jesus Christ, we need to find answers. These are not moments to turn to You-Tube videos. They are heartfelt “whys” and “How’s” of YOUR following Jesus.

Baptism is always about Water AND Spirit – which is why moving from Mark to Acts must seem like moving from the world of Grace and Glory to “**bizarro world.**” That’s Right, the **beautiful conversion** to Grace in Mark turns to a **strange conversation** about The Spirit of God in Acts 19. It is very bizarre.

Have you ever entered a room, and everything felt really bizarre? That’s how Paul must have felt in this story. It might go something like this, you enter a room and sit down to listen to folks around you talking about something that makes no sense in your life experience – your field of work, your discipline or your understanding of protocols and practices. As a scientist or medical professional, you hear a colleague say, “We don’t follow rigorous scientific protocols anymore. We don’t pay attention to the tests we take. We just make up our own results. No one cares about those details anyway.” As an artist, you hear another artist say, “we aren’t going to use colors when painting – just water. Water makes everything so much clearer.” As a teacher, another teacher may be saying, “I regularly spank all the kids who get out of their chairs. Someone’s got to teach them what it feels like to sit still.” As a student, one of your classmates says, “You know it’s okay to curse, call people names, or leave whenever you want in Mr. Jones’ class. He just doesn’t care what anyone says or does.” These are jaw-dropping moments. You have no idea how anyone can do or say what these others are doing and saying. It’s completely out of order. It’s stinking thinking. **You are in Bizzarro world!**

I feel like there’s something like that happening in Acts 19 today. It seems like baptism is a water splashing “free for all.” Paul is new to town in Ephesus and meeting with the Christians who were there before him. They have all been baptized wrong – with water only (as in John’s baptism). Not with Water AND Spirit as in Jesus’ baptism. But I love how Paul handles Bizzaro World.

He doesn't berate anyone. He doesn't chide them. He asks questions. He discovers the don't know anything about the Holy Spirit. So, he teaches them about the power of the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit works in baptism – through Jesus Christ.

He shows them that the Holy Spirit directs the worship and mission of the church. All that we do (to this day) in worship and mission should be guided by the Holy Spirit. Our preaching and the prophetic work we do in the name of Jesus Christ is under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He takes them out of Bizarro World and delivers them in the world of Jesus Christ – all of them now directed by the Holy Spirit.

Paul keeps it simple and then he invites them to receive the Holy Spirit. Problem solved. So, when faced with Bizarro World comments like the ones I offered about science, medicine, art, education, discipline and direction – which I introduced earlier, Paul gently leads his siblings in Christ to the right place – and changes the conversation to conversion. Spirituality and Discipleship embrace. All is well.

There is a lesson in this for us. When we feel or see something we find strange and disruptive to the Spirit of God, we work it through with gentleness and trust. Paul says it this way in Romans 8:28: “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to God's purpose.”

Let us come to the table once again – remembering – we come not because we must but because we may. We come – not with all the answers to all the questions of faith, but we come with our questions, knowing that our God gently receives us and welcomes us – just as we are. We come, not because we are perfect, but with all our imperfections, knowing that our God receives and loves us – **TGNA – Through Grace Newly Adopted.** Amen.

