

Sunday, January 10, 2016 - How Baptism Changes Our Life Together

Matthew 3:13-17 CEB

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Marysville United Methodist Church

I have an interesting relationship with baptism. As someone who's grown up in the church my entire life, the church has almost always been home to me. It's been safe and comfortable. The church has welcomed my really difficult questions. They let me push back hard against things I was taught that I wasn't sure I believed or wanted to live out. And they could handle all my doubts and questions. With each of them I got to a place where I either heard an answer that resonated in me and felt like truth or I just had more questions, which is often the case!

I was baptized as a baby by my dad. And it was not a choice I made. It was made for me. And I'm so glad that they did. Because my parents made that choice and then raised me in the church, I had these wonderful faith communities who showed me what it looks like to follow Jesus.

Fast forward to my confirmation years. I was 12-13 years old in Soldotna, Alaska. Again, I got to ask all these wonderful, hard and awkward questions and really faithful adults tried to answer them or asked me more questions back, which is sometimes the better way! And I remember wishing I had gotten to choose when I was baptized. Because as a 13 year old, I feel more alive in my faith, more connected to God and I wanted to make the choice. They told me I got one baptism in my life - don't get a do over. Then they told me about renewing my baptism and I thought - okay I can do that. My confirmation meant a lot to me because I stood up on my own and promised to give God everything.

I want to lift up our confirmation class. They've been meeting every week since September to grow in their faith and trust of God, to learn about the universal church and our own and to decide for themselves if this is a community they want to be a part of. Many of them will be confirmed on Pentecost Sunday in May! It's an exciting time for these teens and their families and for us!

Alexis, Jackson, Caitlin, Daeson, BriAnna, Easton, Zachary, Gwen, Matthew, Meaghan

Why get baptized?

- When someone comes to me saying they want to get baptized, it's often because it just feels like the logical next step in their faith journey. They sense God is doing something in their life and they're not sure quite what to do next. But they usually get that baptism is the beginning of something new, even if they don't feel 100% ready. Our own Jodie Moll got baptized this past August and wrote these words, "In my searching I have come to realize it is very much a journey, and that baptism is not something I have to wait to do until I am finished learning."
- Baptism is also about **identity**. We usually receive our identity from others, from the expectations of friends and colleagues, from the labels society puts upon us, and from the influence of family. To become Christian is to **receive a new identity**. You no longer allow others to tell you who you are. Christ now claims you and instructs you. A Christian is one who has "put on Christ." Baptism celebrates becoming that new person. That is why the church's ritual begins with putting off the old, renouncing sin and the evil powers of the world, and pledging our loyalty to Christ (umc.org).

When someone gets baptized and we share vows of what the church promises to do, I like to remind churches that they just signed up to rock babies in the nursery, to teach Sunday School, to go on mission trips, to be confirmation mentors, to visit someone in the hospital, etc. We often say the vows and move on. So today, we're going to spend a little time looking at the vows in our United Methodist hymnal surrounding baptism. These apply to children or adults who are baptized.

To parents: Will you nurture these persons in Christ's holy church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life? **I will.**

To the church: Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care? **With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.**

What are we promising as a church?

- Share the good news of Jesus
- Live like Christ (with God's help)
- Surround person with loving community
- Show them what forgiveness looks like
- Help them grow in their trust of God
- Give them opportunities to serve
- Pray for them

How are we doing living that out?

Much of this happens naturally. We encourage each other in our conversations in the Green Room after worship. We're trying to live like Christ in our daily lives (online and offline). We participate in studies and small group conversations where we surround people with a loving community. We create opportunities to serve in our community. We pray for each other.

Church, you are a living and breathing body of Christ in this place. Do we always get it right? No way. But we're on the path. We are living into these vows every day.

Where can we strengthen these vows?

I asked some of the parents of young children and teenagers in our church how we're doing at honoring our baptismal vows as a church. They shared a helpful perspective:

I love that the congregation knows and talks to my daughter. It's usually about her looks (smile or clothing). But just a smile or hug and a "god loves you" is a big deal to a child. Also, someone pointing out one of God's great wonders. It will help kids see God working in everyday life (maybe something we take for granted). Kids need to hear it from others around them and not just their parents. I think things like that will help kids continue on with their spiritual journey.

I love it when people talk to them. Really talk to them, not just say, "oh, you're getting so big."

I would say that we should not only point out the good they do, but also (in the kindest way possible) challenge them to think outside the box. To see the big picture, stretch their minds. Often they will come around, but it takes time and consistency.

As a parent of two little ones in our church, here's what I would offer: Something interesting happened at the last church I served. My daughter would hear these words often on a Sunday morning: "You're so cute! I love your hair today. What a pretty dress." At first, I didn't think much of it. People are so kind and it made her smile. Plus it's hard to know what to say to kids and we want to connect with them. But as the months went on, something changed at home. She kept asking to wear a pretty dress on Sundays. No big deal, really. Then one morning she said, "Mom, I want to wear a pretty dress so people at church will tell me I'm pretty."

It showed me the things we say to each other as the body of Christ matter. And our kids are listening. So the children's director and I talked about this and we started to say different things when we saw children. "I'm so glad you're here today...You look smart today!...Hope you have a great time at church today!"

My cousin works at Target. She recently shared a story of a man coming to her checkout line and at the end of the transaction, he looked at her and said, "in case no one has told you today, God really loves you."

Can you imagine what happens in the life of a child if they heard that every Sunday instead of, “that dress is so cute!”

This past Wednesday, I had my favorite moment of the week when I got to lead chapel for 50 or so of our preschool students. They came into this space, we lit a candle to remind us God is here. We made funny motions to the story of the wise men, sang a song, offered our prayers and I asked the kids what gift they would give Jesus. “A blanket, a card, a crib, a toy.” Then at the very end I told them I was always available for a hug or a prayer if they were worried about something. And I said, “in case no one has told you today, God really loves you.” The smiles were beautiful. Then one girl came up and whispered into my ear as she left the room, “I already know that.”

There’s always room to strengthen the vows we take for each other. I invite us all to especially reflect on how we interact with the children and teens of this faith community. **We have incredible opportunities to speak and show them grace, wonder, potential and love**, especially as they move through such formational times in their lives. Let’s compliment character and love instead of clothing. Let’s show them forgiveness and give them opportunities to serve. We are shaping the identities of children and adults in this church with our words and actions all the time. Let’s make sure we’re using the best ones.

Baptism is a life changing moment. For parents, for children, for adults, it was for Jesus, too. We claim a new identity and a new way of being. A relationship with Jesus becomes the center of our lives. It’s not easy. We need help. So we, the church, vow to help. Let us recommit today to what it means to be the body of Christ in Marysville, Washington.

With God’s help...

We will share the good news of Jesus
We will live like Christ
We will surround each other with loving community
We will show each other what forgiveness looks like
We will help each other grow in our trust of God
We will give each other opportunities to serve
We will pray for each other

And the church said, Amen!

Baptism after message at 9:00 service.