

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 30, 2017

Third Sunday of Easter

Genesis 9:8-17
Acts 2:14a, 36-12

We Believe...

It is always a blessing and joy to celebrate the sacrament of baptism. But it would be incorrect of me to assume that we all have the same understanding of what just happened here with the Kingsborough family. Because as many people are here today, we may have as many different views on the baptizing of little Kathryn.

I'm sure there would be some common themes, but perhaps with different emphases. And given that Congregational churches are largely made up of people who've come from other traditions, we no doubt have different understandings and beliefs about baptism.

One of the most general differences that we have is the distinction between baptism being a personal, individual thing on the one hand - and being a communal, corporate thing on the other hand. These two can never be fully separated, but whether we baptize a baby like we did today, or a consenting adult or teenager (like we'll do in June on Confirmation Sunday), one of these meanings will be emphasized.

And since we have just baptized baby Kathryn, let's think today about what this means for her and for us.

The story goes about the missionary to Tanzania in the mid-1900's. He'd spent a year visiting the a local tribe one day a week, sharing with them what he knew about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

He had come to the point where it was time for him to step aside and for people of the tribe to decide if they were going to continue in the Christian faith. He (Vincent Donovan) writes this of this moment:

I had taught them everything I knew about Christianity. Now it was up to them. If they did accept it, they would be baptized. So I would go away for a week or so and give them the opportunity to make their decision. If they did accept it, then there would be baptism. However, baptism wasn't automatic.

So I stood in front of the assembled community and began: "This old man sitting here has missed too many of our instruction meetings. He was always herding cattle. He will not be baptized with the rest. The two on this side will be baptized because they always attended, and understood very well what we talked about. So did this young mother. She will be baptized. But that man there has obviously not understood the instructions. And that lady cannot be baptized. And this warrior has not shown enough effort..."

The tribal leader, stopped me politely but firmly, "Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During this whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you were not here, at night around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith.

Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken to these people. And I speak for them now. Now on this day, one year later, I can declare for them and for all this community, that we have reached the step in our lives where we can say, "We believe."

Donovan went on to write, "We believe. Communal faith. Until that day I had never heard of such a concept, certainly had never been taught it in a classroom...I looked at the old man, "Excuse me," I said, "Sometimes, my head is hard and I learn slowly. 'We believe,' you said. Of course you do. Everyone in the community will be baptized."

This is not unlike the other story for today of Noah and his family - which has been connected to baptism since the early years of the church. While God spoke only to Noah, telling HIM to build an ark, it became an endeavor for the whole family. It was not just Noah who said "I believe we need to build an ark," they were all willing to say "we believe we need to build an ark."

And so they created the ark as a community, and they survived as a community. Notice, that our font has 8 sides - that is on purpose. (You will never see a six sided font - maybe 4, or round...) That's because 8 people were saved on the ark (Noah and his wife, their three sons and their wives).

So, the connection goes, as all who got into the ark found salvation, so all who pass through the waters of baptism find salvation and entrance into the great ark of the church.

And this is especially so when we baptize a baby. You see, Kathryn had no choice in the matter. This is not an individual thing, when the one being baptized has no understanding of what has happened to her today and no real possibility of remembering it.

That's why we say, "Since this child is not yet of an age to speak for herself, her parents, and godparents, and the church must make promises, so that through Christian nurture she may come to make her own profession of faith and serve Christ in the church and the world."

You see, Christianity is always a team sport - a community endeavor. And this is not just a Congregational idea, but it is at the heart of being a Christian. And even with adult baptisms when the person is making a personal profession of faith, it always takes place in community, and makes one a member of that community of faith.

Baptism is NOT just an event in the life of a person, or even a family. Baptism is an event in the life of the church. It's true that in baptism we have an awareness of God's love and claim on THIS particular person. But the ONLY way for Kathryn to even know not just THAT God loves her, but WHAT that love looks like, is for them to bring her here, and for you to be her Sunday School teachers and youth group advisors.

Because she may hit a rough patch - the whole family may hit a rough patch - just like we all do. And our faith may not be as strong as it once was.

You know, the Apostles' Creed that we said is a good example of this. While we say it in the singular "I believe" it was written to be shared by the church during baptisms. Notice that the singular becomes plural - "Our Lord." We don't say these words because we necessarily believe every word, but because the church proclaims them as the foundation for our faith.

We don't all believe the same things the same way, certainly.

Just as the elder of the African tribe said, "Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith."

Now you may be wondering which of us are lazy, stupid, or have little faith. Well the answer is...sometimes me and sometimes you. Each of us can be lazy about our faith, or slow to learn what God is teaching us, or finding our faith flagging in the face of troubles that seem too much to bear. We are **all** the lazy one, the stupid ones, the ones with little faith.

However, you are **also** the one who is energetic, and intelligent, and the one with great faith. For even when we don't feel it, others can draw strength from our strength. That's what a church does. We bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys.

For the first followers of Jesus, gathering together was never an option. It was always the norm.

So here's a word of comfort and a word of challenge.

If for you, the most important thing about being a Christian is the personal, private, individual faith - you know, just you and God (or you and Jesus, or you and the Holy Spirit, or you and all three) - then your growing edge is to discover the shared faith of the church, to talk more with people here about what you believe, or what you doubt, or what you struggle with, or what brings you joy.

On the other hand, if for you, the most important thing about being a Christian is the group stuff, worship, committees, dinners, social things - and you stay on the surface - then your growing edge is to discover a personal relationship with God (Jesus, the Holy Spirit, all three of them) - where you become attuned to what God has to say to YOU, and how He is active in YOUR actual life.

Because the good news is - it's ALL IMPORTANT!

God speaks to our minds and hearts in ways that are deeply personal that only we can know. AND God speaks through the gathered body of Christ - His church!

What I believe is not enough - what WE believe is what will make an impact on our community for starts and, with God's help, the world beyond.

Amen.