

# Baptism: Called Into Community: Called to Compassion

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday

*Mark 1:4-11*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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*January 8, 2012*

Today is the first Sunday in the liturgical church season of Epiphany. "Epiphany" is a word that literally means an "appearance" or "manifestation." It has also come to mean any moment of great or sudden revelation or realization. In a biblical context, however, it basically refers to when someone recognizes the presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

For instance, on the day of Epiphany, January 6 (the 12<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas), the church reads the story of the three magi, commemorating the manifestation of the divine nature in the Christ child, Jesus.

On this first Sunday of Epiphany, the assigned lectionary gospel reading, whether from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is always the story of Jesus' baptism. It is categorized as an epiphany story for the same reason, "And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:10-11, NRSV)

I like to use this occasion of Baptism of the Lord Sunday to reflect upon the various understandings of baptism. Baptism, by the way, is one of only two sacraments in the Presbyterian denomination, the other being the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which we will also celebrate this day.

As Presbyterians steeped in the Reformed theological tradition, we approach the act of baptism as the **outward visual sign of an inward spiritual reality. That particular reality is our understanding of what God promises to us as children of God.** Our own Presbyterian *Book of Order* provides a good historical understanding of what those promises are:

*As circumcision was the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with Israel, so Baptism is the sign and symbol of inclusion in God's grace and covenant with the Church. As an identifying mark, Baptism signifies*

- 1. the faithfulness of God,*
- 2. the washing away of sin,*
- 3. rebirth,*
- 4. putting on the fresh garment of Christ,*

5. *being sealed by God's Spirit,*
6. *adoption into the covenant family of the Church,*
7. *resurrection and illumination in Christ.*

- W-2.3004 **Inclusion in the Covenant of Grace**

Of all the themes brought up by this broad understanding of Baptism there is one in particular from that list that I want to focus on this morning: **adoption into the covenant family of the Church**. The *Book of Order* itself goes on to emphasize this theme when it states:

Baptism unites the people of God with each other and with the church of every time and place. Barriers of race, gender, status, and age are to be transcended. Barriers of nationality, history, and practice are to be overcome.

- W-2.3005 **Union with Christ and One Another**

**Believing that Jesus did indeed somehow manifest the divine nature and presence of God in a manner like none before or after him, we understand our initiation into the family of God, through our baptism, to include the call to establish a new community superseding that of normal kinship or ethnic ties.** That includes those considered unclean, by either 1<sup>st</sup> century or 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, as part of a new kin-group, thus **initiating an entirely new kind of family where barriers of any kind are transcended and overcome.**

I want to bring that a little closer to home this morning by reflecting upon what it means to be adopted into the specific covenant family of College Hill Presbyterian Church; to be united with the people of God in this particular congregation. **I know that for many of you who call this congregation 'home', coming to church on Sunday mornings is as much about a sense of belonging and connection with one another as it is about connecting with God.**

The more we learn about the ancient church, the more we realize that simply being together in authentic community, a place where all are respected and treated as equals, was indeed one of the primary roles and functions of the early church. Living together in this type of community, therefore, should be among the major roles and functions of the church in our day and age. This congregation, I am pleased to say, knows that.

Now, there are countless ways of discussing what it means to be called together into community. For instance, in a sermon I preached three years ago, entitled, *Living in Community: a 'To Do' List*, I referred to instructions found in Romans 12 of how we are to live in authentic Christian community. The list, written by the Apostle Paul, includes such exhortations as:

*Let love be genuine;  
Love one another with mutual affection;  
Outdo one another in showing honor;  
Extend hospitality to strangers;  
Live in harmony with one another;  
Do not be haughty or claim to be wiser than you are;  
Do no repay anyone evil for evil;  
So far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all;  
Never avenge yourselves.*

- excerpts from Romans 12:9-21

Although not explicitly mentioned in that particular list from Romans 12, there is another trait that is **an absolute necessity if we are to live into the community that we are called to be and become. That is the act of having and demonstrating compassion for each other within this very family of faith. Compassion starts here!**

**But just what is compassion?** In the adult church school class this very morning our lesson was on Jesus' ministry of compassion, and how that compassion in his relationships transformed the people around him. The written portion of the *Saving Jesus Redux* curriculum, produced by the folks at Living the Questions, introduces this theme by making it clear what compassion is NOT. It states: "It is not simply empathy. It's not simply charity. It's not simply pity. Compassion is not the kind of patronizing generosity that is so often what we offer to 'those who are less fortunate.' Compassion is a deep and intimate engagement with 'the other.'"

They give an example. "Writing a check to support the effective work of a non-profit is fine, but writing a check alone perpetuates a kind of compartmentalization that keeps us isolated from experiencing genuine engagement with real people." **This begs the difficult question of how we find ways to isolate ourselves from experiencing genuine engagement with the other real people who make up this congregation – the other folks sitting in the pews in this sanctuary.**

We are all aware that it's not always easy to genuinely engage with one another – in truly coming to know one another, in fostering trust, and where there's been misunderstanding, seeking reconciliation. But that, my friends, is what we are called to be and do. From a spiritual perspective, I would add that **it takes divine inspiration and courage to reach out, to touch, to be compassionate, to recognize our utter interdependence on one another – to see each other as sisters or brothers.**

Presbyterian author Frederick Beuchner writes, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too." (*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 1972, 1993.)

In his 1995 book, *With Open Hands*, Catholic author on spirituality Henri Nouwen has a chapter entitled "Prayer and Compassion," writing about how the two are intimately connected. He writes:

Compassion grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls which might have kept you separate... Compassion is daring to acknowledge our mutual destiny so that we might move forward, all together, into the land which God is showing us.

Compassion also means sharing in joy, which can be just as important as sharing in pain. To give others the chance to be completely happy, to let their joy blossom to the full. We offer real comfort and support when we can say from our hearts: 'That's really good for you,' or 'I'm glad to see you made it.'

And so, compassion removes all pretensions, just as it removes false modesty. It invites you to understand everything and everyone, to see yourself and others in the light of God..."

Nouwen recognizes, however, that there are risks involved when he states, "For compassion means to build a bridge to others without knowing whether they want to be reached." But he concludes, "And yet, **compassion is possible when it has roots in prayer**. For in prayer you do not depend on your own strength, nor on the good will of another, but only on your trust in God. That is why prayer makes you free to live a compassionate life even when it does not evoke a grateful response or bring immediate rewards."

And from our church school curriculum, they conclude, "**Despite all our differences, we need one another. Our collective future depends on our genuine acceptance and affirmation of one another... to be kind and compassionate, just as God is compassionate.**"

**It is our Baptism, then, that leads to the understanding of our calling to live in community as a family of faith, which in turn leads to the understanding of the necessity to exhibit and express care and compassion for each other.**

I encourage you to live out your baptism and your calling as a child of God through your contribution to what it means to live together in authentic community here at College Hill, bound to one another by our mutual compassion! And in implementing Henri Nouwen's connection between prayer and compassion, I will now close with a prayer written by him.

*Dear God,  
As you draw [us] ever deeper into your heart,  
[We] discover that [our] companions on the journey  
are women and men  
loved by you as fully and as intimately as [we are].  
No one is excluded.  
Give [us] a share in your compassion, dear God,  
so that your unlimited love may become visible  
in the way [we] love [our] brothers and sisters.  
Amen.*

And Amen.