



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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November 16, 2014

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 3:11-17

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Marked as Christ's Own Forever”

Whenever there is a baptism a teaching sermon on baptism is in order. And we need to hear about the meaning of baptism every so often.

Why did Jesus come to John at the Jordan river and ask to be baptized? Have you ever asked that question? If baptism was for repentance, for what had Jesus to repent? Repent means to turn around and face in a new direction, to take a different turn in the road. In the gospel according to Mark, dated by scholars to be the first gospel story written, we hear nothing about Jesus until this story. We hear of no miraculous birth, no genealogy, no hasty trip to Egypt, no teaching in the temple at the age of 12. In Mark's account Jesus was presumably a common laborer in the nearby Galilee region, unknown to most but known to John the Baptist by way of family relationships, said to be his cousin. None of the gospels tell us anything of Jesus' life as an adult prior to his baptism.

For Jesus baptism was a pivotal event in his life, a turning point. He was the child of God. But at his baptism he also knew that the time had come for him to not only make a public statement about who he was but it also to begin a three year ministry which was part of his purpose on earth. His baptism marked a call on his human life that had begun at his birth but was only at age 30 sealed and confirmed. On this day he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin his public ministry but his baptism also marked the day in which he began his journey to the cross. And God was pleased with his son because he did not take the human path most taken – the one that takes care of the self alone – the easy path. Instead Jesus chose obedience to the will of God.

At the end of the gospel of Matthew we are told, as followers of Christ, to follow in his example and we are commissioned by Christ to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We are commissioned to baptize and also to teach all that Jesus has taught during his brief ministry on earth. Baptism is a gift of grace that is offered equally to all people. It is a sign and a symbol of the grace offered to us even before we are able to respond. We are all children of God from the moment of our birth but baptism seals the promises of God to us. In it we are marked as Christ's own, belonging to him forever. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

You may have noticed that I made a little cross with oil on the forehead of each child baptized here today. This is allowed in the Presbyterian Church. It is a sign of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, following the example we just heard in scripture as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism. The Holy Spirit is that part of the Trinity that empowers us for ministry. Each of us, no matter how young, is empowered to be a minister of the gospel by virtue of our baptism. We live into our ministry in various ways, by acts of service to the church and to the world.

Baptism initiates us as members of a community – the community of believers – the beloved community – the body of Christ. And, as members of the body of Christ we are given hope in God's promised future. No matter how far away we should stray, the hound of heaven will find us and call us back to our true identity in Christ. In baptism we die to all that separates us from God and are raised to new life.

As a community, the body of Christ is united. In baptism we make a special point of recognizing that unity. Barriers that separate us from each other come down as we practice the unconditional love Jesus has shown to all of us in our relationships as a community. Everyone who is baptized, no matter what age is invited to the Lord's supper where we celebrate our unity with one another and with God. Just as Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and the cross at his baptism, we also turn from selfish desires and face into obedience to God's will and to the crosses we will encounter in being obedient. Love is costly and as Christians we commit to risking all for love.

We are not automatically “finished” in the act of baptism, in fact, we have just begun. Sanctification – becoming God's Holy people – is a lifelong process. We have just made a commitment to nurture and teach these young girls the faith that we have received. That is a big commitment and must not be taken lightly. It doesn't end with confirmation either. We are lifelong learners, lifelong disciples of Jesus and as we study the word of God even into our 80's and 90's we never cease to be astounded. We never cease to grow in understanding and relationship with God until that day when we meet God face to face and our baptism is complete. Even when we stand at the bedside of the dying we are still fulfilling the covenant we made at their baptism, to continue nurturing them until their dying day.

The water of baptism is a powerful metaphor. Water cleanses and renews us. Water brings forth life in dry places and is necessary to continue to sustain life. In the waters of baptism we die to an old way of life and are reborn into a new way of being, rooted and grounded in Jesus.

And finally, in baptism we receive the assurance that we are loved and treasured by the one who gave himself up for us, the one who walks with us day by day and leads us beside the still waters; the one who heals us, feeds us, and sustains us all the days of our life. As these children grow in faith they will come to learn the songs of love that we all learned as children and which we should never forget. Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so. Never forget to sing this love song to the newly baptized and to each other.