



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Baptism of the Lord
First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 11, 2015

Acts 19:1-7

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

Baptized by Love

**We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.
Trusting in his holy word, he's never failed us yet.
Oh, Oh, Oh, can't turn around.
We've come this far by faith.
Oh, Oh, Oh, can't turn around.
We've come this far by faith.**

The disciples in Ephesus did not even know that there was a Holy Spirit. I am not sure that we did either a year ago. We had forgotten what it was like to be a community of love. Into what then have we been baptized?

I was baptized at the age of 11 and it didn't take very long from the time I answered the altar call until the next Sunday when I was being dunked in the big font behind the altar, but it took much longer for me to find the ministry to which my baptism would lead.

For twenty three years after that I sat faithfully in the pew listening to sermons and singing hymns. It was not until I was 34 that I came to understand the power of the Holy Spirit and what it meant to be baptized by love. Four years before that, at the age of 30 I thought God was calling me into ministry as a missionary, but then I found that in the Episcopal church all the missionaries were ordained priests. At that time women were just being ordained and I had never even met a female priest. When I finally did, I found that they were mostly very special women, not ordinary like me. So when I entered seminary at the age of 36 my own self doubts began to surface. Surely I was not worthy or capable of this undertaking, I convinced myself. And so I changed my course to the Master of Theology program rather than the Master of Divinity that would prepare me for ordination.

Then, for another twelve years or so I continued to sit in the pew and listen to sermons and sing hymns but now I had also been licensed as a lay preacher, a lay

Eucharistic minister, a lay chalice, a lay reader, and had also served as a Vestry person (similar to session), a Sunday School teacher, a youth choir director, and a Stephen minister. People kept asking me when I was going to be ordained as a priest. I knew in my heart that God was still calling me into ordained ministry but I was still afraid that I would not be accepted if I took the steps to reach out and seek this.

Then, when I was 51 a good friend was killed in an airplane crash. He was a doctor that I worked with and a devout Christian. He had talked to me many times about his calling to be a medical missionary. But he never took the steps to do it. A few weeks after his funeral I was flying my plane high over Kansas on my way from Oklahoma City to Denver to see a friend and as clear as day Don was there with me in that airplane. I could feel his spirit all around me and I heard him whisper in my ear, "God has called you into ministry, do it now."

I called my bishop immediately after returning home and made an appointment to meet with him. That process took another three years, including a year's internship at a small local church, but in 2004 I returned to seminary for two more years to complete my Masters of Divinity. When I graduated in 2006 my bishop did not ordain me, however, and it was one of the greatest losses I had ever experienced. I had left my career and now I had no future to look toward. And I was lost. But I stayed in the pew and listened to the sermons and continued to sing the hymns and did whatever ministry I was asked to do.

In 2009, after spending some time as a hospital chaplain, I began a doctoral program in pastoral counseling at San Francisco Theological Seminary which is Presbyterian. I knew nothing about the Presbyterian church until then. There I met my husband, Peter, who served a church in Northern Minnesota. We were married and I moved to Minnesota which all of you know (because I have told you enough times) is the coldest place on the entire globe. The Presbyterians liked me! The chair of the committee for the preparation to ministry asked me to lead her church, a church about the size of ours, while she was on sabbatical, even though I wasn't even an ordained deacon or ruling elder. She gave me an office and everything and I loved those three months. And so, finally, 32 years after God had called me into ordained ministry, I was actually ordained – by the Presbyterians! But really, I had been doing ministry; preaching, teaching and healing, for a long time just as so many of you have been doing in your ministries.

In due time God brought me here to this place, to all of you. I never dreamed that I would be called to lead you through this time of transition as your pastor, and I will tell you that whatever good has been done here has been purely a gift from God. There is no way to adequately tell you how much last Sunday's "surprise" meant to me. It affirmed for me everything I had ever been afraid to hope for, that with God's Holy Spirit within me and working through me, I was worthy and capable of doing what I had been called to do, so many long years ago.

On paper my experience is limited, but I learned a lot sitting in those pews and listening to sermons and singing hymns for forty years plus years. I learned a lot about

love. But all of you have given me my finest lesson in that regard. Together we have discovered just what we were baptized into. And that is the love that makes us a community. That is the love that empowers us to reach out a hand to another person in this community; to let down our facade and trust that they will accept us as we are. It is the love that empowers us to take chances and trust in God to lead and guide us.

Last Sunday I asked you at the 10:30 service to take the hand of your neighbor if you felt so moved as we prayed the Lord's Prayer. A year ago I would have been afraid to ask that and I don't think too many of you would have responded to the request. Last Sunday my eyes were closed so I don't know how many of you did respond, but I think you are less afraid to reach out and both give and receive those tokens of affection – less afraid that your hand might be rejected, and if it were you would feel that you were rejected too. I am no stranger to rejection. But love calls us to reach out anyway and take a risk because the rewards of love are things like last Sunday's flash mob. I hope that each and every one of you gets to experience that outpouring of love at least once in your lifetime: before your funeral. For me, that once in a lifetime gift is enough to last a lifetime and if I died tomorrow I would die happy. Although long deferred, because of you, God's call to me to serve the church of Jesus Christ has been fulfilled.

Today is not an end. It is not a good-bye. Next Sunday we are going to welcome two new beloved children of God into our congregation. This will not diminish us in any way. It will not diminish me in any way. Far from it. It will only enlarge each and every one of us. Love is not an exclusive thing. The more we give the more our hearts have to give. And I know that you will welcome Brent and Karen Eelman into your hearts and into this community and show them the same extravagant love you have shown me.

One of the blessings of a larger congregation is that you can have more than one minister. Rev. Eelman has spent his entire life in ordained ministry and that is a huge commitment. He has dedicated his LIFE to serving others. That alone is worthy of your respect. I am convinced that the Rev. Dr. Brent Eelman will bring to our congregation many gifts to share. I am convinced that we will work together to bring you to the place where you are ready to choose and welcome a new installed pastor. Let me just tell you some of the positive things it will mean for both me and for this congregation.

I have a family. They may have forgotten by now what I look like. In the coming months I will be able to see my family again. If you have been in my office on the third floor you know that it often has stacks of papers going every which way. Multiply that by nine months and you get an idea of what my desk at home looks like. Drawers and closets look the same. Now I will have some time now to do a good housecleaning. I will have time to read books again, maybe even read the newspaper. And now I can even get sick if I need to. But more important than those things, I will have a colleague in ministry; someone to bounce things off, to discuss theology with, to learn from.

But for you, this means that you will have another voice and another perspective from which to hear the word of God. I get tired of hearing my own voice and I am sure you must as well. You are lucky that you will have both a male and a female voice to hear because gender does make a difference. A diverse congregation has a much greater

chance of growing than one that is homogenous. When a visitor comes and everyone looks and acts and understands the word of God in the same way, they either fit in and stay or they don't and they leave. In this church there is room for everyone because we are not all the same.

Brent brings to you over 30 years of experience in the Presbyterian Church and he understands Presbyterian polity. I took one course in Presbyterian polity and failed the polity exam the first time I took it. Most of you know I have a Book of Order sitting right next to me on my desk, just in case. Brent probably knows the Book of Order by heart. He brings experience in administration and staffing issues, in the budgeting process and in moderating session. Brent is an accomplished preacher who has had sermons published. I have gone online and read some of his sermons and I like them. I will enjoy listening to them. Brent brings a knowledge and love of music so I expect that he will be introducing us to some new music that we have never before considered and that it will enliven our worship. Brent's coming also means that you will get more of my time devoted to pastoral care and spiritual development.

I learned a lot sitting in the pews and listening to sermons and singing hymns those forty plus years. When I was asked a hundred time during the ordination process what led me to ministry I could honestly answer, "God has given so much to me and I

would just like to give a little back." You have allowed me the opportunity to do just that. You have supported me and have taught me how to be a Presbyterian. I hope I have given each of you some small insight into the love of God. I have loved every single minute of the past nine months as your pastor. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for putting your trust in me. But I have told you over and over again that this is not about the minister. Jesus Christ is the head of this church and it is in him alone that we place our trust. We must continue to do that. In the coming months we must trust that not only has God called both Rev. Eelman and me to be leaders among you, but God has baptized you by love and called you to trust that you are being led every step of the way by the Holy Spirit. Last March we sang a song together if you will remember. Today I would like for you to join me in singing it again. I will sing it through once, then join me the second time around and if it sounds good maybe we will even sing it a third time. Then we will pray together the Lord's Prayer and if you are so moved you may take the hand of the person next to you as we do. Please stand if you are able.

**Lead us, guide us, along the way.
For if you lead us, we cannot stray.
Lord, let us walk each day with thee.
Lead me, O Lord, lead me.**