

“KNOWING WHO YOU ARE”

Mark 1:4-11

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

First of all, I would like to say publicly how much I appreciated Rev. Dan Bogre stepping in last week-end when I was completely incapacitated due to an intestinal virus. You don't want to know the details, but when my wife gently suggested that I call Dan on Saturday morning, I objected vehemently, hoping that I would feel better as the day went on. You see, I had my sermon all ready for Epiphany: the story of the Magi finding Jesus, not by the prompting of a global positioning system, a GPS, but by looking at a star, something no one else seems to have seen and no one else seems to have followed. Preaching the sermon is not the best part of being here. It's the fellowship with all of you. I wanted to be here. But, alas, it was not to be. By Saturday afternoon, I couldn't even stand up, let alone preach. So after he had already conducted two funerals on Saturday, my wife called Dan and asked if he would preach Sunday, and he graciously said, "Yes." I am grateful for him and for Rev. Ray Holt and the others who filled in during my absence, and I am grateful to God to be back with you this morning. Sometimes it's good to be reminded of our own vulnerability. That's a sermon in itself!

The night before Thanksgiving, my wife and I were having a quick supper before heading to the Heights Community Thanksgiving Service. The phone rang. It was our credit card company. Had we been making purchases in Texas, the representative asked? No, we responded, without hesitation. To make a long story short, someone had obtained our credit card number and was merrily driving across Texas making purchases and charging them to our account. To our horror, we learned that a number of fraudulent charges had already been made. We were instructed to cancel that account immediately. We had become the victims of what is known as **identity theft**, a process that has already caused us untold hours of headache and is not, as yet, resolved.

Well, fortunately, our credit company was on the ball. Things seem to be moving toward resolution, but it gave us an uncomfortable feeling to say the least. Have you ever been the victim of identity theft? While I cannot protect you against credit card fraud, as your pastor, I can absolutely guarantee that **your spiritual identity cannot be stolen**, for at your baptism, you were marked by God as God's child, and that mark can never be erased or stolen. You are permanently, indelibly branded against identity theft. You are a child of God.

Some churches wait until children and youth are old enough to make their own decision about baptism, but in the United Methodist Church we want the world to know as soon as possible after our children are born, that we believe God has created them, claimed them, and marked them as God's very own. At baptism, we celebrate who you are. We dream about what you may become. We affirm that God has a purpose, a plan for your life. You are not here by

accident, but by the fixed design of Almighty God.

It is no accident that the element used in baptism is water. Scientists tell us that water makes up 70% of our bodies. Geologists tell us that over 70% of the earth's surface is water. You can live for a good while without food, but you cannot live very long without water. Water is essential to life. It is a symbol of life, and of the new life offered to us in Jesus Christ, who said, "*Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.*" (John 4:14a)

The United Methodist Church practices both immersion and what we call "sprinkling," when only a small amount of water is used. "Sprinkling" is the typical form of baptism when the water, just ordinary tap water, is placed on the persons' head three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Recently two young women of Asian ancestry were baptized by immersion at a special service of GPS held downtown at the Cleveland Athletic Club. Rev. Bogre said it was one of the most powerful experiences of his life. When the person goes under the water, it is a symbol of the death of all that is unrighteous, the washing away of sin. When the person is brought up out of the water, it is a symbol of rising in newness with Christ. Of course, it is not the amount of water that is the most important thing. The water on the outside is but a symbol of what is happening on the inside as we focus or seek to focus our children's vision on what God is calling us to be and to do.

Baptism is appropriate at any age. If parents are seeking to place God's mark upon their children — God's branding mark that tells the world our true identity — then we emphasize that baptism commissions us for service in the world. At every baptism we remind you that God's blessing is upon each and every child that God has created. When folks come to be baptized as adults, then, like John the Baptist, we emphasize that baptism also means the washing away of sin, the cleansing us of all unrighteousness, and the fresh start that God offers to each of us.

This morning we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, who was baptized by John as an adult. Wait a minute! Didn't we just celebrate last Sunday the coming of the wise men to worship Jesus in the manger? Someone at staff meeting commented, "He sure grew up fast!" Babies do! Before you know it, these little one that we hold in our arms will be going to preschool, then grade school, middle school, high school, college... just that fast, or so it seems. We must not miss any opportunity we have to help them, and to help each other, know who we are and whose we are.

Baptism is not magic. I have said to parents that I wish when I take their children to the altar that I could wrap them in a bubble and keep them safe from the evils of this world and the inevitable conflict that will come into their lives. But I cannot. Nobody can. Baptism tells us who we are, but it doesn't make us immune to temptation and to sin. When Jesus was baptized, the Bible tells us that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. But note that immediately Jesus was driven into the wilderness, where he was tempted for forty days: tempted to veer off course, tempted to follow his own passions and desires rather than the path that God had for him.

I repeat, baptism is not magic. The story is told of a church where some pigeons were doing unbelievable damage to the gutters and the roof. (We have had some pigeon problems at Church of the Saviour.) The custodian was at wit's end. He had tried everything to get rid of those pigeons, but nothing had worked. Finally the pastor had an idea. "You round up all the pigeons," he told the custodian, "And I'll baptize them." That's what they did. And they never saw those pigeons again!

Sometimes people bring their children for baptism and then, in spite of the teaching of the church that baptism is just the beginning of a life of faith, we seldom see these baptized children. I know a number of parents who have gotten the notion that while parents should train their children in academic and vocational skills, they should not “impose” ethical or religious values upon their children. “We tell our children what we believe, but we also tell them that they are free to make up their own minds.” I know families where the 4 year-old decides at breakfast on Sunday morning whether or not the family will attend church that day! Then there was the father who told me that his 12 year old son doesn’t seem to care too much for church, and after all, you can’t force him at that age, can you? That same father had no problem, (I suppose “force” is too strong a word,) but he had no problem “strongly encouraging” his young son to get out of bed for school, to be on the baseball team, to take music lessons and be part of a host of other activities. But when it came to church, well, somehow that was different.

I believe that many of us parents suffer from a failure of nerve in regards to the nurturing of our children’s faith. We are certain that we will send them to school because we are confident in the value of education. We are certain that they will take music lessons because we are sure that music enriches a person’s life. We insist that they do household chores because we know that the ability to work is basic to our well-being. But we lack confidence that in matters of religion we have anything special to offer them. We are going through a period where everything is up for grabs, in which all of our values are being questioned and many of them are being jettisoned. So who am I to pass on to my children who they are and what they should be? In other words, we suffer, not so much from a lack of know-how, but from a lack of faith in ourselves, our values, our tradition and our witness. As we gaze into the water of the baptismal font, do we know who we are?

Our baptismal vows remind us that we are claimed by God and called by God. As United Methodists we believe that God wants us not just to be self-confident and self-assured persons, which is in itself a tall order in today’s world, but to share God’s love with others and help them understand who they are and what God wants them to be. We are called to live out the vows of our baptism by witnessing in word and deed to those who have not heard or heeded the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called as individuals and as a congregation, to strengthen, develop and renew Christian communities and congregations, beginning right here in Cleveland Heights, and extending to the four corners of the earth. We are called to alleviate human suffering, both locally and in the world. And, we are called to seek justice, freedom and peace for all people.

Now that’s a huge challenge! Those four goals are bigger than any of us can accomplish, larger than all of us put together can hope to achieve. Yet they are totally appropriate for Christian people. And they are achievable, with God’s help. To those who say we are too naive or too idealistic for this tough and sometimes heartless world, I would respond with the words of a contemporary author, *“If religion and spirit and faith don’t make you idealistic, what’s the point? Idealism recognizes the difference between how things are and how they should be, and it expects us to get to that better place...We need to have horizons that are bigger than reality; we need unreasonable, soaring aspirations.”*(1)

We are just beginning a new year, a year filled with promise and with hope. As we embark on the journey, let us first gaze into the waters of our baptism so that we will **know who we are** and **whose we are**. Our identity cannot be stolen! We are called to an awesome purpose with soaring aspirations and lofty goals. We are baptized. We are sons and daughters of God!

Prayer: Dear God, remind us of our high calling. As we gaze into the waters of our baptism help us to see who we are and what you are calling us to accomplish in the world. May we witness to your love, build and strengthen Christian communities, seek to alleviate suffering, and seek peace and justice in our world. Help us to focus our lives on these lofty goals you set before us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Note:

1. Hirschfield, Brad. *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism*. Harmony, 2008.