

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, March 29, 2009

Jeremiah 31:31-34

A New Covenant – chapel service only

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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Three ministers got together for lunch and in their conversation, realized they shared a common problem: pigeons on the roof and in the bell tower. The first minister said he tried to get rid of them by spraying them with water. But by doing that, he caused leaks in the roof – the pigeons enjoyed their bath but never left. The second minister said she tried putting up plastic snakes with the hope they would scare away the pigeons. Well – that didn't work either – the pigeons seemed to enjoy sitting on them. The third minister announced that she'd solved the problem – the others were surprised and asked how she did it. She said, "It's very simple. I went up on the roof, baptized and confirmed them, and I haven't seen them since."

The sacrament of baptism – we've talked about it in confirmation class – the sign and seal of participation in God's community – the water of cleansing, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit – the welcome into the faith and family of the church of Jesus Christ – what a joy it is to celebrate the sacrament this morning – and I'd ask, in what ways does this sacramental moment – a time when we enter into the mystery and promise of God's love and care for each of us – how does this moment affect the child, the family, the wider family of faith? How does this moment affect you, me – us together as church? Are baptisms understood as a time for all people in the worshipping community to consider and renew their baptismal vows?

This is a very special time in the life of those who will be baptized in a few moments – let's make it a special time in our lives together as well.

So, what makes it that way?

We often get phone calls from families either we haven't met or seen in a long time – they have a new baby and they want to have her "done" – have her christened – maybe they'll use the word "baptized" but that's unusual. Sometimes they'll ask to have the ceremony at a time other than Sunday morning worship – it's not convenient, they say – can't we just gather as a family and have the baby baptized? I'll try to explain that baptism is a community event – that they will be making some very profound promises – that God loves that child baptized or not – that baptism isn't some magical act that will protect that child from pain or trouble – that this is a sacrament of welcome into God's household. Not long ago I had one of these calls from a new mother living far away – they had no church affiliation but they wanted their baby baptized here. I had my usual conversation about the importance of the sacrament, the promises she and her husband would be making, and suggested that they find a church in their area where they could join in that community of faith. Then they might decide to have their daughter baptized there. Well, she told me that there was an old connection to this church through the mother's family and I said that perhaps we could baptize the baby here honoring that old connection as we represent the wider church and then commend them to the new church where the baby would be raised, nurtured by that church.

Well, the young woman was not happy with this and we heard from her mother within a few days in protest – why can't we use the Glen Ridge Congregational Church as our family church? I'm not an active member, she said, but it is where I was baptized, married, where my parents celebrated wedding anniversaries. She went on to say she understood the position that her daughter and husband should be a member somewhere, but she said right now they are struggling with many questions of faith. What they do know is that for this most important event in their daughter's life, they want to return to the Glen Ridge Congregational Church.

That conversation has haunted me ever since in so many ways. What does it mean to "use" the church – how can it be her family's church if family members don't participate in any way in our common life? And what is this sacrament of baptism all about, anyway? I think this is a big deal as today we have the honor and joy of baptizing three of our young people – two in preparation for the Rite of Confirmation. We know that baptism and confirmation are closely linked, don't we – the confirmands will be asked the same questions we ask the parents today – it's in the Rite of Confirmation when they make their own promises, answer for themselves, take their places as members of the church.

What difference does all this make as we go about our daily routines of living? That's the question from the confirmands – and that's the question we all have.

Today I invite you all to remember your own baptism – many of us were babies when it happened – but let's relive that special day – because for all of us here, it did make, does make, a difference in our lives – that special day planted a seed in us that continues to grow and bloom all our lives. That special day affirmed to us that we are loved, that we matter, that we are part of something bigger than we can imagine, more wonderful than we can express, more mysterious than we can explain – we can only look in awe into the miracle of God's abiding love for us, each and every day.

To give us a context, let's look for a few moments at the history of baptism in our Christian tradition. We know that every tradition has a cleansing ritual – a cleansing into new life. And we know that the people in the time of Jesus were being baptized by John the Baptist – we know that Jesus himself was baptized by John but what was added then was the baptism of the Holy Spirit – not just water. And we know that Jesus says in the great commission in Matthew that we are to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So in the very early days of the church, baptism was not a momentary rite – it was too important for that - but it was a part of a long process of initiation into the Christian community. For those who were admitted as catechumens - not everyone was – candidates for baptism – there was a three year period of instruction! Three years! That initial instruction included Old Testament study, attending worship – but during this time they could only attend the first part of worship - they were dismissed before the Lord's Supper itself. After the three year period, those catechumens who proved themselves by their knowledge of the faith and by the way they lived their lives, were admitted as "candidates". Then a few weeks before Easter they were given instruction in the gospel – this was reserved for the final stages of their process.

The sacrament of Baptism took place during the Easter vigil – that period of time immediately before Easter. On Thursday before Easter, the candidates bathed and then they fasted on Friday and Saturday. Saturday night was spent in vigil, reading, and more

instruction – and then as the first light of day appeared on horizon on Easter morning, the baptisms took place. See how the sacrament is connected to rising into new life? Then and now.

That morning each candidate was led individually into a special room called the baptistery – there was a large basin set into the floor large enough for two people to stand in, a canopy over the font itself and beautiful paintings on the wall. Why is this important? At the time it was the practice to decorate only the most important room in the house – the rest of the rooms were left plain - the place of baptism was the most important – that’s why art hung in this room alone. The candidates shed all of their clothing and were led into the water where the deacon asked the same questions we ask today. And as the candidate responded, he or she was immersed in the water. After three immersions, the candidate was led out of the water, given new clothing to wear – usually a white robe – and then went into what was called the Assembly Room to join the others – it was a great time of celebration and joy – and a profound welcome into the life of the church! They then joined in worship, but for the first time, they were able to stay for the entire worship service including participation in Communion. This was a very big deal in their lives – they knew it and the community knew it too.

Baptism is a life forming, life affirming, life changing, and life connecting faith event. It’s not just a celebration and a welcoming of a child – for when a child is baptized, the congregation is renewed. The congregation, the household of God is reconnected, changed! The covenant is expanded and includes all of us in a new way.

And we are part of this ongoing tradition – we are connected through the ages as our parents answered the same questions we ask today when we were baptized: they said yes when asked if they desire to bring you to be baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ.

And a really tough question: will you encourage your child to renounce the powers of evil – we sure don’t like to think of the powers of evil, do we, and when we hold a baby in our arms for baptism, it’s difficult to sense the presence of evil that certainly exists in the world, isn’t it. What does this mean to us anyway?

Well, unless we are involved in naming the evil in the world, keeping it in front of us so we know who we are and what we are being called to do, we can slip into the fruits of evil: the silence of racism, sexism, ageism – we can fail to see the poor, the homeless, the suffering among us – the forces of evil at work to tear us apart, human from human and country from country.

Let’s name some of the evils of the world today: think to yourselves what some of them are – and as we name them we are reminded through this sacrament that we stand together with all parents, all children, working together as a faith community to bring into the world God’s justice, righteousness, and peace. That’s an ongoing battle, isn’t it. But baptism gives us the strength and the confidence to fight that battle.

And we don’t do it alone – because we are no longer individuals – but people bound together through the sacrament of baptism, all children of the New Covenant – to be raised in Christian faith by the congregation as a whole – we’re all in this together, aren’t we – now and always.

And when we bring a child to be baptized, when we gather for this sacrament, we affirm that together we will further Christ’s mission in the world, making disciples and bringing God’s realm on earth as it is in heaven.

We become partners in the nurture as we promise our love, support, and care to the ones about to be baptized. Think about that! We are reaffirming our part in the household of God responsible for each other – let's listen carefully to those words we say and understand the responsibility and joy that goes with that. No, the sacrament of baptism is not a solitary experience – it's rich in promise for the gathered community and it's rich in responsibility for the gathered community. And for those of us who have been baptized – someone made those promises for our benefit too. We are connected, aren't we and now it's up to us to pass it on. Just as these promises have been passed on through the generations, we make them again and continue the tradition into God's future. Baptism is a big deal!

Baptism as a sacrament of the church is both a sign of the presence of God in the life of the church and a symbol of God's action in our world. This sacrament reminds us who we are and whose we are – it reminds us of who God is calling us to be - God's children. The waters of baptism mark us for a life of faithful service and witness in God's name. Let's rejoice in this gracious gift – the God's gift of love and life ours for the taking. And let us live our lives in response to that gift – in covenant with God and each other - now and always. Amen.