

*By Water and the Word*  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Ephesians 4: 1 – 6**

**I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.**

There is the old story of the Baptist minister and the Episcopal priest who were best friends. They met for coffee or lunch every week, often went fishing together or shared vacations. One Sunday the Episcopalian had the day off. He decided he would attend his friend's church. He really enjoyed the spirited sermon that his Baptist friend delivered.

As it turned out it was communion Sunday. In this congregation the elements of the Lord's Supper were passed down the aisle, as we do on communion Sunday. The priest was rather surprised, however, when the paten of bread reached the woman sitting on his right side. Instead of passing the bread to the priest she lifted it over his head to the parishioner sitting on his left side. Likewise, when the wine came down the aisle the

woman stood up and handed it to the Baptist sitting on the priests left side.

The Baptist minister was somewhat embarrassed, and worried that his dear friend would be offended. As soon as the service was over he rushed down the aisle to greet his Episcopal colleague. “I am so sorry, my brother. But please understand. We could not serve you communion because you have not really been baptized.”

The priest was not disturbed. And with a big smile on his face said, “Don’t be worried. I was not offended. And besides, I could not have taken communion from you anyway.”

“Why not?” asked the Baptist minister.

“Because,” replied the Episcopal priest, “you have not really been ordained.”

I want to speak about baptism this morning. But it is not my intention to compare and contrast the various meanings of baptism in differing traditions. I will not discuss such aged questions as “believer’s baptism,” or the validity of infant baptism. This is not a history of baptism, not even Congregational history. I am not prepared to discuss the various means of baptism, be they immersion or dry cleaning or anything in between.

Why, pray tell, would I bother with such a topic? During the last year and a half I have been approached by families and asked to administer baptism for their children. I am speaking specifically of families who do not attend this church and are not involved in its ministry. Perhaps the parents were married in this church or had an older child baptized here. We have not seen them before or since any of these other sacraments were administered. They are not involved in the life of any other congregation and come here for the convenience of their extended family.

I have to be very honest with you and tell you that this makes me very uncomfortable. It feels somewhat dishonest, not only in terms of the commitments that parents make on behalf of children, but also the covenant this congregation extends to the child and his or her family. Let me explain why I find both a moral and ecclesiological conflict with this issue.

As you know well, we are not a creedal church. We have no statement of faith, creed, or doctrine that people must swear their faith and allegiance to. Like other congregational churches we ask aspiring members to be familiar with our covenant and affirm it. The covenant reads:

“In the love of truth, and in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, this Church exists to serve those who believe that the Christian faith affords our clearest insight into the nature and will of God. Accepting that faith as our guide, we join one with another to worship and work so that peace, justice, and brotherhood may prevail in this world.”

This covenant does not stipulate what the members of this covenant believe. Our covenant is not about beliefs but about what it means to be a community of faith. Congregational churches assert the freedom of individual conscience but also claim the purpose for which a congregation is organized and the direction of its ministry and programs. In fact, when you join this church you must understand that there will be theological, religious, and philosophical differences of opinion, not only with other members but also with the minister. But where we find consensus is in this covenant that determines our identity and purpose. You and I might disagree about the physical resurrection of the body. But we are united in our shared purpose of understanding the nature of God through the person of Jesus Christ. We are likely to have different, even conflicting, ideas of the humanity or divinity of Jesus Christ, but we are commissioned together to bring peace, justice, and brotherhood to this world.

The covenant is the defining statement of who we are as a Christian congregation. This is how we understand the body of Christ and that is why we are members of University Congregational Church and not some

other church. Every person on our membership roll is a person in voluntary association with our stated purpose.

In the celebration of Christian baptism at University Congregational Church parents are specifically asked if they will nurture their child within the values of our covenant. They are asked to teach their child the characteristics of God's kingdom that include peace, justice, and brotherhood. In return, the congregation is asked to pledge itself to the wellbeing of this child within these covenantal norms.

I believe it is disingenuous for all parties involved to make such sacred pledge without any commitment to the shared values of our covenant. I believe it is disingenuous because a covenant is not about an individual or an individual's faith. A covenant presumes a community. In other words, our baptismal vows are communal not individual. We are all in this together – sharing the roles of nurturing, bearing one another's woes, celebrating life's victories, and holding hands in silence when the pain is beyond the capacity of words to ameliorate. Mothers and fathers, grandparents, godparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and friends in Christ bear the baptismal covenant in community. We are all in the grace of God together.

I do not believe that the parents of a child or an adult taking baptismal vows can utter the words of promise and then walk away from the communion of faith.

Every week I talk with people who are planning weddings, facing life threatening diseases or dying, struggling with crumbling marriages, dealing with unemployment, or planning a fresh start in college or work. We do not do this stuff alone very successfully. I believe that we join with one another to worship and work to bring peace, justice, and brotherhood not only to the world at large, but also into our very own homes, our apartments, our workspaces, our families.

The other day I was in a coffee shop. The young woman behind the counter was not very busy and we struck up a conversation as she steamed the milk for my café mocha. Before I knew it she told me that she had a couple of children. Her husband is a recovering alcoholic. His road to recovery began when he was in a drunken altercation with police officers. He was shot in the leg, which eventually had to be amputated. He still faces legal issues. She said, “I told him never again. If he ever came home drunk he would never come home again.”

She then asked me, “Do you think that was selfish of me? Should I have said that?”

I leaned across the coffee bar and said, “Absolutely! You have to take care of your mental health and the health of your children. In fact, if you do not take care of your mental health you will not be able to take care of others.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Other people have told me the same thing.”

I had never met this woman before. I was honored that she trusted me. I was proud of the way she had taken stock of her life and marriage. Her continual love for her husband is both remarkable and evident. I also had a little tug in my heart for her apparent loneliness, and prayed that she have some faith community to sustain her.

Baptism is the means of initiation and welcome into the body of Christ, the community of faith. Water is the sign of baptism, and words of covenant and grace are the seal of our inclusion.

Let me quickly say what I hope is obvious. I do not believe that baptism is magic. In fact, making, sustaining, and nurturing persons in communities of faith is as much hard work as it is grace. I do not believe baptism keeps a person from sin or evil. It is not a moral prophylactic, protecting one from temptation or ethical ambiguity. I certainly do not believe that a person must be baptized to avoid the fires of hell. Of course, I do not believe in hell as most people understand it anyway. So if

a person or a family comes to me hoping that I will baptize anyone for these reasons I am afraid they will be disappointed.

If baptism were some kind of divine magic it would be so much easier. Magic is less time consuming. It would be most efficient. Magic frees us from the worry of promise and commitment. With magic we eliminate the fear and the pain. With magic you don't lose sleep. And perhaps most importantly magic delivers us from relationships. But then, if baptism was magic the Christian church could not claim it as a sacrament. For as St. Paul reminded the Ephesians, the Christian faith is all about "bearing with one another in love." Love is about the service of humility, gentleness, patience, and the hard work of maintaining unity.

Earlier this month I spoke with the Board of Deacons about this concern and there was strong agreement that we create a congregational policy about the administration of baptism. This sermon is meant to establish some of the groundwork for that process. I have found other congregational churches that have created such policies and I look forward to our offering a meaningful and helpful document that will guide us in the future. At the heart of this guideline is an understanding that families and individuals seeking baptism are engaged in the life, worship, and work of University Congregational Church. You might also be

interested to know that the communal nature of baptism is understood throughout the Christian family.

George Odell wrote about the communal nature of life and I want to close with his words:

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

I believe that the church is one body of love and service. As Odell said, “All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.” May the sacrament of baptism at University Congregational Church make sacred the love and service of human needs. May all who enter these doors find their place in the hands of grace, embraced by this community with the love of God.

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