

A Homily Preached at Endicott Park Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Service, September 3, 2017, Rev. Kevin M Smith, Luke 3:21-22

When I was about twelve years old my Mom and Dad and big sister all dressed up in white sheets. Underneath all we had on was our underwear! While wearing our white sheets we were ushered into an office through which we were then ushered through another door into a little antechamber. Another door was opened and we ascended up three stairs into the tiniest swimming pool I had ever seen in my long life. We followed this guy who was leading us right into the swimming pool, white sheet and underwear all! Then this guy slid a window open in the wall and there they were all these people dressed up in their suits and dresses staring at us! Yup, we get dunked in the sacred and holy dunk tank of the Opportunity, Washington Valley Church of the Nazarene. Holy Moly we had a good time!

How many of you remember your baptism? (Not many, eh?)

When you grow up, like I did, in a church that descended from baptists you don't get baptized unless you fully understand what you are doing. It's called the "believer's baptism." I remember going to classes with other teens, adults, Sunday School teachers, and the pastor to learn about baptism of Jesus and the cleansing of our souls that and preparing us for the Kingdom of God that was taught in that church.

I remember also being in my junior high school for years before I was baptized and talking to my classmates. None of them were from my church—they were all Lutherans or Presbyterians. I always felt a little bit jealous when they would tell me they were already baptized. Of course, they were; their Moms and Dads had them baptized when they were babies. So, I would ask my Mom and Dad why they hadn't done that for me. I was told that "we" believed that every individual should make their own decision on whether or not they were going to follow Jesus Christ and that our church felt that only young people of a certain age and adults could full appreciate what they were doing.

What are we doing when we get baptized? Well, let's just look at the scene in the gospel of Luke we all read this morning. From what we can tell in reading just these words from the Gospel, we know there was a whole crowd of people who came to the river to be baptized by John. We're not sure if it was all adults or perhaps there were some children, too. And, when Jesus came into the river to be baptized by John, my God if the heavens didn't open up and and down flew a dove that descended upon Jesus. This dove, we are told, was the Holy Spirit in the form of a bird. Doves have been a symbol of blessing and peace ever since. And then God blessed Jesus in a voice from heaven telling him "you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well

pleased”. Baptism is a sign of the grace and blessing upon us given to us by God that we are loved.

So that is what we might think is the whole story. Well, before all this took place the Gospel also tells us that John was preaching a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins!” So, here comes the Church of the Nazarene, my former church family, with the hard stuff and baptism is not just about a blessing—it’s also about seeking forgiveness and repentance. When we repent, we turn our lives around from all the selfishness, and anger, and oppression of other people and do what John tells all the people that they must do. He tells them just because you were born into a faith doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. You have a job to do! You must “bear fruits worthy of repentance!” He tells the good folk if you have two coats you give one to your neighbor who needs one! He tells them to be fair and generous and tells the tax collectors never to collect more than they were supposed to take. And he tells the people of the sword, the soldiers, don’t use your weapons to make threats, bear false witness or extort money. In other words, John was preaching that the Good News of God is not just about blessings and grace but about a duty to serve God by serving your neighbors and practicing social justice.

Folks, whether we practice a believer’s baptism or we get a head start when our parents have us baptized (or “christened” as many New Englanders like to say), when you take on the life of Christ within you there is job to do and way to live your life. John’s baptismal message can be summed up this way: loving God is about serving. Loving God and accepting God’s blessing give you a duty to treat your neighbor—especially your oppressed neighbors—with justice, fairness, love, equality and never ever take advantage of your privilege of birth.

This is the time in this country when John’s message could not be more critical to the church. This is Christ’s body and Christ’s body is for mission, service, and doing mercy and justice in the world. If that is not a vision to focus like a laser beam on I don’t what it is. Amen.