

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Other churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary are today hearing the same lessons we've just heard. Last week my friend Jack Knoespel, pastor of Rutherfordton First United Methodist Church, asked if I had a crucifix he could borrow to illustrate a story he's telling in his sermon today. As you know, a crucifix is different from a cross in that it bears the image of our Lord's crucified body. For me the crucifix is a reminder that we do not worship the cross, but the Son of God who died on it, and although some would say it's too Roman Catholic for Protestants, I'm happy that this large crucifix hangs behind me as I preach to you each week, reminding all of us why we gather here—to worship and give thanks to our Savior.

In the past week, we've moved from the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, where he was visited and adored by the lowly shepherds, through the visit from the magi, astrologers from Persia bearing gifts. Today we fast-forward to Jesus the man, being baptized before he begins his earthly ministry. And today we'll baptize Nathaniel Holt McCurry, a baby who is just as precious to his parents as the baby Jesus was to his own. We don't know if his earthly parents were there, but we do know that at his baptism Jesus heard the voice of his Father from heaven, saying "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." That is the message of baptism, not only for Jesus, but also for Nathan, for his parents and godparents, and for all of us: God cherishes each and every one of us, and in our baptism, we return God's love by accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior.

In the Episcopal Church, we recognize baptism as one of the two great sacraments, the other being the Holy Eucharist, or Communion. Sacraments are an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, and in baptism, water is the outward sign of God's grace working within us. Like other Christian denominations, we recognize that baptism was instituted by Christ during his earthly life. Baptism is a ritual of initiation into the greater Body of Christ, what we call the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Used in that context, "catholic" doesn't mean the Roman Catholic Church, but rather the universal church of all who believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Baptism includes the three components contained in all initiation ceremonies: (1) the person being initiated makes certain promises to do his or her part as a member of the group; (2) others who are already members receive the person into their group and promise to support him in his membership; and (3) the new member is incorporated into the group through some particular action. In Christian baptism, the new member makes specific promises about living a Christian life; and we who witness those promises agree to support him. Then, through water and anointing, the initiation takes place.

In our church, which our Presiding Bishop calls "the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement," we baptize infants and children despite their inability to make the same promises we expect adults to make. There's a specific connection here between baptism and communion and the belief that communion was to be administered only to those who had been baptized. Our Canon law, that is the "rules" of our church, declared that infants should not die without receiving communion. In times when the infant mortality rate was much higher than today, that was a real possibility; yet the same Canon law proclaimed that they could not receive communion until they had been baptized. In those days, baptism was often done within days, or even hours of an infant's birth, and the service was usually private, with only close family in attendance. Circumstances and culture have changed, but we continue to baptize children, intentionally bringing them into the

body of the church to learn how to live in Christ, and we solemnize this commitment to Christ through vows and promises made on their behalf by adults.

Now, as then, we accept the promises made by the child's parents and godparents, as they agree to be actively involved in the child's development and formation in the Christian faith and life. Being asked to be a godparent is not simply an honor because the relationship between a godparent and his or her godchild is not simply one of mutual affection. Being a godparent is a BIG (all caps) responsibility. It involves prayer and *active* participation in the child's spiritual upbringing, even if the child's parents don't always honor their own vows in that regard.

But the parents and godparents are not the only adults who bear responsibility for this child. All of us who witness the vows of a child's baptism agree to support him in his life in Christ. That role may differ for each of us, depending on exactly what our relationship is with the child. We who are members of the Body of Christ here at St. Francis have a precious opportunity to watch our children grow in their lives of faith; we also have a *duty* to ensure that our church provides what they need to become strong, committed Christians, and that means more than simply watching them grow—it means taking an interest in them and being involved in their Christian formation.

We could talk for a long time about the theology and practice of baptism in our denomination and others, but what is most important about baptism is how it changes our lives. Being initiated into Christ's body is nothing like being initiated into any other organization. Christianity is not a club and the church is not a clubhouse where we come for a meeting once a week. And of course it's more than a lifestyle; it is the essence of our lives; not something we turn off and on at will, but the source of our very being. All we have and all we are is a gift from God through Christ.

I made a deal with my friend Jack, whom I mentioned earlier, that he could borrow my crucifix if I could borrow his story. Turns out it was actually from something written by the late author Flannery O'Connor about a little girl who loved to visit a Roman Catholic convent. The nuns loved having her visit, too, and hugs were always shared between them. Because of the little girl's size, whenever she hugged the sisters, the crucifixes they wore made an imprint on her face. The imprint of Christ...*that* is what baptism does for us—it imprints Christ on us, not only on our faces but on our spirits, so that he is always at the center of our being, the guiding point for everything we do and say.

At our own baptisms, and in the renewal of our baptismal vows, we make five very specific promises: to (1) continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; (2) to persevere in resisting evil, and when we fall short, to repent and return to the Lord; (3) to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ; (4) to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and I would add, remembering that every human being is a child of God and consequently every human being is our neighbor; (5) to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being. Each of these promises requires action on our part and we make them with a very specific condition: "with God's help." No matter what we promise God, we can keep our promises *only* with God's help. From time to time we *will* fall short because we are imperfect human beings. But there is good news, always good news in our relationship with God in Christ. As David Sanchez told our young people last Sunday, God loves us all the time, not only in our good times, but also in our bad times. That, Beloved, is amazing grace!

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all at the day of our baptism and evermore. *Amen.*