

## ***"Baptism and Belonging"***

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 29, 2019  
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Holy Scriptures: Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup> He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

<sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.*

<sup>33</sup> *In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?*

*For his life is taken away from the earth."*

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Core Resource Book:

DISCIPLES: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together, By Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn (CBP, St. Louis, 2019)

## Baptism and Belonging

Baptism is a sign and seal that we belong to God and to one another.

One Sunday morning in a Christian Church in Guthrie, Oklahoma

Betty and I heard a story:

A mother stepped out into her backyard because her children were just too quiet.

You know the feeling? I bet you do.

You'll never guess what her kids and their friends were doing.

They had the garden hose going and had filled a big wash bucket with cold water.

Their poor dog was in between the wash bucket and the hose.

An argument was in full force between her kids and their neighbor's children.

*"What are you doing?" she asked. "What is going on here?"*

*"Mommy, we are playing baptism and we want to save the dog.*

*We can't decide how to do it.*

*Should we immerse the dog under the water*

*or just sprinkle him like the Methodists and let him go to hell?"*

All jokes aside, once we get beyond arguments

about how baptisms are conducted

-- sprinkling or immersion, infancy or age of understanding --

we should have conversations that matter

about what baptism means to you and me,

what it meant to Jesus Christ,

to the church,

to the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us,

We should talk about its purpose, its gift, its power

to draw together humanity with God

in a covenantal, everlasting relationship.

In the words of the Preamble to the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ):

***"Through baptism into Christ,***

***we enter into newness of life***

***and are made one with the whole people of God."***

We Disciples affirm that "Baptism is a public declaration of God's forgiveness

and of one's incorporation into the church of all times and places."[\[1\]](#)

"That's why we love being Disciples.

At our best, we Disciples have been a most unusual combination

of radical discipleship and ecumenical openness.

We have practiced believers' baptism

while seeking unity with those who practice differently.

We have preached a costly faith without claiming that we have the last word on it:  
[we are] Christians only, but not the only Christians."<sup>[2]</sup>  
Disciples resist the temptation of so many religions to believe  
as "if God were theirs, rather than the other way around."<sup>[3]</sup>  
Through baptism "we are free from claiming our identity  
or self-worth through things that are transient;  
we are free to live no longer for ourselves alone."<sup>[4]</sup>  
"Disciples biblical scholar Leander Keck puts it this way:  
"For Paul, baptism does not end mortality; it begins a new morality."<sup>[5]</sup>

## Baptism and Belonging

Throughout the Book of Acts we hear the Word of God  
in the stories of Philip and Peter,  
Ananias and Paul, Lydia and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy,  
each one a follower of Jesus who place their lives at God's disposal.

In Acts Chapter 8,  
we encounter the apostle Philip  
channeling the spirit of the prophet Elijah.  
Like Elijah, the power of the Holy Spirit plucks up Philip  
and plants him where it wills.  
Like Elijah, Philip finds himself in situations  
where he has an opportunity to witness about God's love.  
Like Elijah, even though Philip finds himself in a wilderness situation,  
he knows he is not alone; wherever he goes, God's already there.

One fine day in the wilderness  
Philip encounters the Ethiopian reading from the scroll of Isaiah.  
The Ethiopian is perplexed by the Word he is reading,  
pondering in his heart the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 55.  
*So Philip...asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"  
He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"  
And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.  
Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:  
"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,<sup>[L] [SEP]</sup>  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,<sup>[L] [SEP]</sup>  
so he does not open his mouth.<sup>[L] [SEP]</sup>  
In his humiliation, justice was denied him.<sup>[L] [SEP]</sup>  
Who can describe his generation?<sup>[L] [SEP]</sup>  
For his life is taken away from the earth."*  
The eunuch asked Philip,  
"About whom may I ask you, does the prophet say this,  
about himself or about someone else?"  
Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture,

*he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. -- Acts 8: 30a-35*

The two talked and read the scrolls as the chariot made its way down the road.  
Clearly, it was legal in that land to text and drive.

So excited was the Ethiopian to discover that immediately after  
the Suffering Servant song in Isaiah 53:7,  
the grace of God's hospitality is extended in Isaiah 56: 3-5.  
Here in the Word of God the prophet states  
that the benefits of the Messiah are extended to both "foreigners" and  
"eunuchs."

All souls are joyously welcomed into full membership with Israel.  
Everyone belongs.

You belong, we all belong to God.

If Philip hadn't believed that, too,

he never would have gotten into the chariot and befriended his neighbor.

Talk about the power of being baptized:

a baptized apostle named Phillip saw the invisible in the wilderness.

He saw an Ethiopian who was a eunuch, reading the holy scriptures on a lonely road,  
and treated him with respect and the human dignity he deserved.

Everyone belongs.

## **Baptism and Belonging**

We Disciples celebrate that "Baptism is a sign that the person is adopted by God  
and received into a new family of faith." (p. 53)

Baptism binds us to God and one another.

So touched, so moved was the Ethiopian,

that as they went by a river, he exclaimed,

*"Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"*

Just as the church is to have no barriers,

just as the Word of God is freely given, freely received,

so, too, is the rite of baptism open to one and all.

Look, here is water!

What is to prevent you from being baptized?

Look, here is the Bread and the Cup!

What is to prevent you from dining with Jesus Christ?

Look, here is the whole people of God!

What is to prevent you from yoking your life with a community of faith?

Betty and I had a seminary classmate who hailed from Ethiopia.

His doctoral dissertation traced the lineage of his hometown congregation

back two thousand years,

two thousand years back to the conversion experience

of a particular Ethiopian.  
He traced the lineage to the same Ethiopian who was baptized by Phillip.  
The new Christian had gone home "rejoicing on the way"  
and started the first Christian Church in Ethiopia which is going strong today, still  
sending out people to serve in their community,  
to study for the ministry, to go forth rejoicing on the way.

A Middle Eastern Jew-turned-Christian and an Ethiopian eunuch  
put aside what might divide or destroy or detract.  
They delved deeply into God's Word  
allowing it to explode in their hearts and minds  
and formed a fast friendship grounded in belonging.  
The world hasn't been the same since.  
Look, here is water!  
What is to prevent us from doing the same?

### **Baptism and Belonging**

Couple Monday mornings ago,  
our congregation hosted here a class of 10 seminary students and one teacher  
from Candler School of Theology at Emory University.  
They are classmates of our Seminary Intern Jennifer Hasler,  
who made the arrangements and was present.  
The course is Contextual Education.  
Con Ed, in shorthand, is for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students.  
They serve a local church for a full year in preparation for the Christian ministry.  
Pastor Anna and I spoke with them about our experiences as clergy,  
then gave the whole group what I like to call the nickel tour.  
Everyone who comes on our nickel tour gets their money's worth.  
You will be shown where and how we host a dozen non-profit organizations;  
visit our Chalice Thrift store and learn how it works;  
admire the lawn that holds July 4 celebrations & Christmas Tree & Wreath  
Sales;  
explore the old church gym transformed into brand new Decatur Makers Space;  
tour the Church's Decatur Toy Park and get a blow-by-blow description  
of how we and that playground helped revitalize an American city.  
The tour begins, of course, right here.  
In the Sanctuary.  
In front of the Communion Table and Baptistry.  
Every time.  
Because here is where we ground ourselves weekly in the Word and Will of God.  
Here is where we gather to connect with the Holy Spirit and one another.  
Here is where we remember our baptism with Christ.  
Here is where we meet the Living Christ

to serve one another at the Lord's Table as He first served us.

The same Spirit which baptized Christ  
forever identifies us with the Suffering Servant, with the Messiah, the Christ,  
ordaining and commissioning us to follow in his wake.  
Through Baptism into Christ we are ordained into Christian ministry.  
I first heard that testimony at University Christian Church in Fort Worth,  
as preached by the Rev. Dr. Albert Pennybacker,  
and it changed my life, my attitude, my spirituality.  
As Paul said about life after baptism,  
*"Present yourselves to God  
as those who have been brought from death to life,  
and present your[self] to God as instruments of righteousness."*

We are ordained through our baptisms into Christian ministry,  
to become witnesses, ambassadors, teachers, models, and instruments of peace.  
The work and play of Christian ministry is cosmic;  
God is so proud to make it happen in and through us.  
This is the reason our church bulletin reads: Ministers: All the People.  
We're all ministers, ordained by our baptisms.  
Baptized, we rise dripping wet to be led forth by the Spirit into the world.

On the nickel tour, as we stood around the Sanctuary talking,  
we learned that most everyone had been baptized as an infant.  
None of the seminarians had been baptized at an age of understanding,  
or personally experienced what is known as a believer's baptism.  
They expressed curiosity about baptism by immersion at an age of understanding.  
"Believer's baptism recognizes and upholds people's freedom  
to affirm faith in Jesus Christ for themselves."<sup>[6]</sup>

In the words of the Preamble to the Design:

***"Through baptism into Christ,  
we enter into newness of life  
and are made one with the whole people of God."***

A seminarian got excited when she saw the outside of the baptistry.  
"Oh, can we see it?" she said, and hopped up and down a little bit. "Can we go in?"  
My friends, you don't have to ask me twice.  
*Here is water; what is to stop us from going in?*  
So, Anna and I led them to the second floor,  
and then down the flight of stairs into the baptistry.  
One flight of steps only goes down into the water, for we die with Christ,  
and the other only goes up, for the baptized rise with Christ into new life.  
Envision the scene.  
Early Monday morning.

Ten adult students, their teacher, two Disciples clergy.  
All crowded in the baptistery, all of us imagining it filled with water up to our hips.  
Using mime and the liturgy,

I demonstrated the form  
and unpacked the function of believer's baptism.

Any questions?

"Yes," said a seminarian. *"What do you do if someone is disabled,  
and he or she can't get into this baptistry?"*

I'll share how Anna and I addressed his question:

there are alternative venues and other means of baptism available  
that suit such a situation

—carrying him or her into the baptistry, or dipping in a larger pool,  
or sprinkling with holy water.

Baptism is an outer expression of an inner conviction.

What matters most in that equation is the inner conviction.

## **Baptism and Belonging**

The nickel tour continued until it was time for them to move onto other matters.

Two Mondays ago, a seminary class was schooled in what happens  
when the Holy Spirit goes to work among a people who trust that they -- and  
everyone -- belong.

However, the echo of his question reverberates in this Sanctuary.

Listen to what his voice raised.

*"Look, here is water! What is to prevent someone from being baptized?"*

This is what God does through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Holy waters that once cleansed our bodies and souls, minds and lives  
continue to be at work and play.

God uses us, works through us, empowers us

to ask the question and do the follow through.

How can we better share the love of God with people who are not present, here, now;

with those who are marginalized, left out, not being served;

with those who desire, deserve, demand to be loved.

Flip through your Bible, Old and New Testaments, take your pick.

You will witness page after page, story after story, testimony after testimony

from people who are on the margins of society

being seen and heard by Jesus and the prophets and apostles.

People who are invisible to society

suddenly find themselves being loved, served, included,

discovering to their amazement that they belong.

We all belong.

Everyone belongs.

Let me share something fascinating about the Word of God.  
In the Bible it's the folks that society dismisses  
    who, when they do speak up, show up, stand up,  
    become God's change agents that society so desperately needs.  
All through the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And then they go forth, rejoicing on the way.  
What is to prevent us from doing the same?

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

#### EXTRA MATERIAL:

One Sunday morning in Maine during Children's Church, a child named Suzy was visiting for the first time. The teacher observed quickly and quietly that Suzy had one arm. She hovered near Suzy throughout the class to make sure that no one bothered or teased her. No one did. Eventually she relaxed. When it came time to conclude Children's Church, she got all the children to form a circle. She said, *"Okay, let's put our hands together and say, 'Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, send out the people...'"* Suddenly, she realized what she'd done. Without missing a beat, however, Tommy turned to Suzy and offered her his hand, saying, *"Here, Suzy, let's put our hands together like this. Then we can be the church!"*

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[1] DISCIPLES: Who We Are & What Holds Us Together, By Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn (CBP, St. Louis, 2019). P 53.

[2] Ibid. P 59.

[3] Ibid. P 59.

[4] Ibid. P 56.

[5] Leander Keck, Romans, 2005, P. 161. Quoted in Kinnamon & Linn.

[6] Kinnamon and Linn. P 52.