

Matthew 3.13-17

“Remember Your Baptism and Be Thankful”

“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Today, we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. We remember how Jesus came from Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan River. The baptism of Jesus is one of the few stories found in all four gospels even the details are consistent. This would suggest that the baptism of Jesus was, for the early church, something that they considered important and something that they shared essential agreement. I wonder, if the baptism of Jesus still has something important to say to us today, some twenty-one centuries later.

Written on a little card attached to the inside rim of the baptismal font at Knox United Church in Prince George, like a cheat sheet, are the words; “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” No one remembers who put them there or why.

Those words are often used as part of a service of renewal of baptismal vows. Again, no one at Knox remembers ever having such a service. I introduced the service to them as part of a New Year’s Eve Watch Night Service. I missed not having that service this year.

Incidentally, on New Year’s Eve, I received three texts from people who have participated in that service over the years saying that they were also missing the service.

Remembering our baptism for most of us is difficult because we were baptized as infants. There are some forms of emotional therapy that allegedly can take you back to your experience of being in your mother’s womb. I suppose we could use their techniques to remember the day of our baptism. My hunch is that it might not have

been a particularly pleasant event for most of us. After all, we were probably being awkwardly held by some strange man we didn't know who was pouring tepid water over our head and getting it in our eyes and up our nose. My mother said that the doctor that presided over my birth and the priest that officiated at my baptism were both raging alcoholics. It is no wonder I have been in therapy most of my life. There must be some other way to understand that phrase; "remember your baptism and give thanks." **(change slide)**

When an infant is baptized the parents and god parents vow to raise the child in the way of our faith. They are committing themselves to teaching the child the rudiments of the Christian faith. Traditionally, when the child becomes a teenager having been thoroughly grounded in the rudiments of the faith and taught the sacred stories, he or she is then required to take personal responsibility for living out those vows. This transition of responsibility from parent to the child is recognized through the service of confirmation. The child is confirming his or her

commitment to following the Christian faith. We could have a long discussion about how this process is working for us as a denomination and as a community of faith and why some denominations have more success at passing on their faith to their children. **(change slide)**

Like many children raised in the church, soon after my confirmation on June 1, 1975, I began to wonder away from the church. I do not remember my baptism but I do remember my confirmation. It was at St. James Cathedral in downtown Hamilton, Ontario. One of the things I remember most vividly is that I had a new light blue and white checkered suit. It was, perhaps, the ugliest suit I have ever owned. To make matters worse I was extremely overweight at the time. My mother, God bless her, has only one picture of me from my entire teen years and it was taken on that day. I look like a huge checkered blue whale. (Another reason I have been in therapy most of my life.)

My first years of high school were difficult and I wandered into some dark corners. Eventually, I found my way back into the church. It

was a very different church than the one of my childhood. It was livelier with drums, guitars, fiddles, choruses on overheads and even the occasional speaking in tongues. It was also more conservative and strict. It was exactly what I needed at the time and I am very thankful for the years I spent in that church and the lessons I learned from them.

At the time, I had a radical conversion. I had a profound experience of the reality of Jesus and I gave my life to him. I asked him to come into my heart and become my personal Lord and Saviour. In response to this radical conversion I decided to be baptized again. I am, therefore, a true “Anabaptist.” Historically, “Anabaptists” were 16th century followers of Jesus who believed in adult baptism. Many were re-baptized when they were adults even though they had been baptized as infants. They are the predecessors of the Amish, the Hutterites, the Mennonites, to name just a few. They were often persecuted for this action because it challenged the political and social structure of their world. I was never persecuted though my father was

deeply hurt by my decision to be re-baptized and to join the Mennonite Brethren Church.

I do remember my second baptism. It was Sunday, April 22, 1979. It was by full emersion. At the front of the church there was a tank full of water. I was asked by the pastor four things; did I believe in Jesus as my Lord and Saviour, did I believe that he died for my sins, had I repented of my sin and was I committed to following Jesus. When I said yes to all four questions, the pastor held my back and gently dunked me backwards into the water three times. In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. It was a powerfully sacred moment. **(change slide)**

I still remember that moment and give thanks even though I have wandered a lot of miles since that day in April. My faith has ebbed and flowed and taken me down many different roads. My beliefs have changed and evolved. I sometimes miss the clarity and simplicity

though I don't miss the arrogance and the judgemental nature of those early beliefs. **(change slide)**

My understanding of baptism has also changed over the years as has my beliefs about God, Jesus and many of our orthodox beliefs.

However, I still believe it is important to remember our baptism and give thanks.

Baptism tells us two very important truths: we are a beloved child of God and we are called to work with God to build a better world. Those are the same two truths that Jesus heard on the day that he was baptized. God said to Jesus; "You are my beloved with whom I am well pleased." Then he was sent into the wilderness to wrestle with demons and out into the Palestinian countryside to do his ministry.

Our baptism reminds us of who we are and what we are about as a people of faith. We are loved by God. God sees us as beautiful, capable and gifted people. Just as God was pleased with Jesus, God is pleased with us. In God's eyes, we are enough and we have enough to do all

that we are called to do and to be. God sees beyond our mistakes and missteps and invites us into relationship, a relationship that will transform us and our world. God sees beyond our brokenness and failures and invites us into wholeness. God sees beyond our wanderings and invites us to find our way home to the warm embrace of God's love. God sees beyond our self-centered and ego driven lives and invites us into a life of deep meaning and purpose by building a world of love and justice for all. God invites us to live our lives of faith in such a way that the world is just a little kinder, a little more just than it was before we arrived. I invite us to remember our baptism and give thanks.

During the singing of this next hymn I invite all those who wish to come forward and receive a touch of water on your forehead to remind you that you are loved. To remind you that you are a beloved child of God. To remind you that God has called you to join God and all God's people in building a better world here and now. A world where

everyone has a seat at the table of God's abundance and where there is water and light enough for all. **Amen.**