



Baptism-Why it Matters

As many of you have heard me preach before, I reject soundly traditional understandings of original sin. I do not find them to be biblical and instead look to our historical record to see their development centuries after Jesus preached and lived. Yes, we know that we are not perfect beings, as we continue to evolve, we have the capacity to become better, but we also have the capacity to create havoc, we are capable of doing evil, creating harm and bringing on great destruction. The human condition is a work in progress.

We are not fallen creatures; we are evolving creatures. Jesus didn't die on the cross to save us from God's wrath, Jesus died on the cross because he threatened the powers that be and because he was willing to live for what he believed in. Jesus didn't die for our sins. Jesus lived for the things he believed in, Jesus lived for love and loved so greatly that he was willing to die for that love and in doing showed us that love never dies.

So, if baptism is not 'for the forgiveness of our sins' then why does it matter? What is the significance of this ancient ritual, carried on today?

The UCC will tell you that through the waters at baptism, God embraces you, no matter who you are, and brings you into Christ. Through baptism you become a vital part of the local church and the wider church. And in return, the church promised to love, support and care for you throughout your life.

Through baptism, God claims us, and we know that we belong to God. God offers an extravagant welcome and we share in it. God keeps covenant with us, and we unite as one with Christians through the world. God offers a vision of justice and love and we are inspired to live it.

Together, through water, we know the still-speaking God. Through baptism we are opened to the reality of the miracle of life and are connected to something larger than ourselves.

That is all lovely but when I began seminary, I had an experience that simplified this ancient ritual for me in a lovely and dramatic manner. In seminary I had to take several classes that were focused on the sacraments. I studied the theology, the history, the liturgies and just two years into seminary, I was asked to give the Children's sermon at a UCC church on the day that an infant was going to be baptized. I was flush with knowledge, overflowing with detailed

understandings of this ancient ritual and I worked for weeks to translate that into a children's sermon that would explain to the kids gathered just what the ritual that they were about to see was all about and what it meant.

So, I gathered the young folks to the front of the sanctuary, there were about ten of them ranging from crawling babies in their parent's arms to teenagers. I explained to them that during the service they would see a baby baptized and then I made a fatal error. I asked a question to that group of young ones and all of you who know little ones, know that this was a pretty naïve move on my part.

After I had explained the baptism ritual that was to happen to them, I asked them if any of them knew what being baptized meant. I of course assumed none of them would answer and I would then launch into my brilliant and well prepared and highly detailed children's sermon about what exactly the rite of baptism meant. Well things didn't go quite like that. As soon as I asked that group of kids if they know what being baptized meant, a young girl raised her hand straight up. This girl was about five at the time. She capitalized on my moment of shock of not knowing what to do with the situation to grab the microphone out of my hand and proceed to provide her answer to 'what does it mean to be baptized'.

'It's simple', she said. 'When you are baptized, God gives you a little kiss, like when you mommy kissed your cheek and you know she loves you. It's a little kiss from God.' I sat there and felt the weight of my hard-earned knowledge of theology and history and liturgy slowly slipping away in the presence of her clarity and wisdom and I slowly nodded my head, 'yeah I said, that's it. It's a kiss from God and you know are loved'.

Baptism is a sacrament, a sacrament that holds so much promise. When we dip our hands into the font, we remember the love that has flowed in, with and through our lives and we receive that kiss of God, like when a beloved kisses us and we know we are cherished, we are loved.

Amen