



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

November 14, 2021 “Choosing Water” Rev. David Jones

This week I had the opportunity to spend a little time with each of Hetty, Sam, and Caity. Not as much time as I might have liked, but such is life and ministry together in a busy time like ours. Even something as momentous and ancient and mysterious as baptism into the Church of Jesus Christ is not immune to the constraints of time, whether that is the time of a day, somehow too long *and* too short; or the time of work, that is somehow rewarding *and* draining; or the time of family, somehow the most important thing in the world *and* the easiest to take for granted.

Sometimes, because of time, it is more important to act before you are ready than to insist on being ready--or to immerse yourself in water before you have learned to swim. In the history of Christian communities and churches, in the history of faithful ministry, baptism waits for us at the beginning of our journey, or finds us in the middle of it, or even greets us at the end. There is no correct time, there is only the right time for each person. It may be the outward expression when the time for an inward question has come, or when a long simmering hope is about to boil over. It may be the outward expression of a service you have already started behind the scenes, say with the Board of Trustees or Diaconate or a Search and Call Committee.

Or for some of us, the “right time” may be no time; baptism may never be the right way to express what is within you, it may be too co-opted or too lost to ideas and practices that upset that deep, resilient part of you where a part of God also lives. Maybe that part of God has seen too much of the evils or complacency of others who were baptized.

But today it was the right time, and as a result we received a gift as a community. We have received and partaken in the baptism of three people--three children of God--who we know pretty well. So baptism this morning is not only some ancient creed, it is not an arcane ritual, it is not deceitful. Baptism this morning is the outward sign of things we know we can trust: the outward sign of Caity’s inward courage, of Sam’s inward leadership, of Hetty’s inward strength. It is the outward sign of the inward pride that God feels when God looks upon each of them. Baptism today is as pristine as clear water.

Caity was baptized today because she cannot look away from the world as she sees and feels it. She is a teacher, whose students appear to her as souls; she cares for them as if they were her own, with all her heart and all her mind and all her strength. There is no justice here, no peace, until there is justice and peace for her new kin that she first met last year working as a para in the third grade. She has chosen the waters of baptism because our community keeps an open table, where *every* child and every family is welcome and fed.

Sam was baptized today because he is, as a young man, already a leader, one who leads with kindness and a welcoming demeanor. He was baptized because he looks out for his family and his church and for his teammates. Sam seems to recognize that by knowing where he will take his stand, by being both steady and flexible, he makes room for others. Sam has chosen the waters of baptism because his family, his school, his community, his church, are owed our service and devotion.

Hetty was baptized today because she is sensitive to how unsettled our world has become, how strong the currents against us and the earth really are. But just when we are being pulled down into a rip

current, it is time for us all to draw a deep, settling breath, to abide the spiritual calm of commitment that will carry us back up into the open air. Hetty can draw a straight line from witnessing Rev. Kate baptize a man at the Ashfield Lake to the intentional step she has taken today. She has chosen the waters of baptism as a celebration that we are not alone in this world; her baptism is an outward sign of her hope in our church's mission, and in the hope that those who have lonely souls will not be lonely forever, that they too might come to see our church community as a bar to grab ahold of in a rocking bus or subway car--that they will at their own right time, turn to others like a trusted rudder on a shaking sea.

Baptism has so many meanings, some that may seem obvious, others that are obscure and hard to grasp. But the gift we have received this morning is the gift of Caity's, Sam's, and Hetty's baptism; not baptism as an idle sacrament, but *their* baptism: baptism into the gifts of courage, strength and leadership, into the gifts of compassion, wisdom, and responsibility, into care, daring action, and peace. These gifts come to us in human form, in the bodies and minds and hearts of sisters Caity and Hetty and brother Sam. They are gifts we can recognize and celebrate, because we recognize these gifts as alive within each of us, in that place where part of God resides in each of us. None of us is alone.

But the world we live in would have us believe we are alone, that we have to compete with one another without remorse, that we have to conquer and dominate, that the land belongs to this person or that person, that there is no reason to hope for something different. Baptism is an outward sign of the inward rejection of this resignation. Baptism is a sign of our resistance to this defeat, and baptism in a sanctuary like ours before witnesses is a sign that the struggle for something new belongs to each of us, and each of us belongs to it. God is not finished with any of us, God has work for us to do, and the scale of the work is so great it will only be sustained in the company of souls. This is what we are being born anew into--freedom from the constraints of this world, into God's reign on earth. Baptism is one way--the way chosen this morning--to consecrate who we are by turning forever away from faithlessness toward hopefulness.

"People are cruel and violent," says the world, "and they do awful things to one another and that's just the way it is. Always has been, always will be."

Don't tell that to the baptized. You can't tell that to any of us who have chosen the living waters and the ministry of the trees--another way is always possible.

"The earth is for us to use up and trash" -- no, that's not what my baptism told me. Life is a precious gift and we are grateful for it, we will care for this planet as if it were our own parent's house.

"There will never be a perfect system or a perfect world, there will never be equality" -- but here we are, baptized into the kin-dom of God!

"I'm sorry, Caity, you can't help that child," but Caity remembers the water on her forehead, she remembers the sign of the cross, she knows that mighty water is going to carve a new path for life. Her heart instructs her now and in the presence of the Lord there is fullness of joy!

"I'm sorry, Sam, you'll have to leave your family behind and go get yours" -- but Sam remembers the waters too, and he will always share his cup with his brother and sister.

"I'm sorry, Hetty, but that person lost their way and they are gone for good, no one person can help them" -- but Hetty's hair is still wet from the font, and all are welcome here, a whole community can help them, we can all share the work, all share the rewards and the burdens in God's world. No one is alone.

Whether the time for your baptism has come, or whether it never should come, the right time for dying to this world around us has come, so that we too might walk in newness of life.

Alleluia and amen.