

## **The Invitation of Baptism**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17**

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC, Camden, Maine; January 12, 2020*

My teacher Jim Finley tells the story of a couple who were celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They enjoyed the day together and planned a lovely celebratory meal. During the meal, the husband presented a gift to his wife of 25 years. He was an accomplished psychotherapist. "Darling," he said, "for our anniversary I have prepared a very special gift for you. In fact, I have been working on it for years! I have prepared a detailed analysis of your personality, habits, likes and dislikes, triggers and traumas. My work is entitled: "You." Then he proceeded to hand his wife a very heavy book because there were so many pages in it. He proceeded to say, "Honey, to make it easier to work with this book, I have also created a detailed index in the back. So you just have to look up a word like 'reactivity' and you can find all the page references for your convenience! What do you think? Do you like it?" As he was talking, his wife's eyes were gradually filling with tears. They did not appear to be tears of gratitude and appreciation. This troubled the husband greatly because he had already begun his work on the second volume which he intended to complete by their golden anniversary. He was going to entitle it: "Us."

What might this humorous anecdote have to tell us today in light of our scripture texts? First of all, let me clarify that I do believe that therapy can be very helpful. It behooves all of us to take responsibility for our own thinking, processing, our projecting onto others and our actions in general. There is no one here today who does not have habits or thoughts that are harmful or at minimum not conducive to living as wholesomely as God would wish. We have work to do! We have a responsibility to live our own lives as mindfully as we can.

We do experience ourselves as unique individuals with unique habits and gifts, names and attributes. We seem to share in the human need for regular affirmation, a sense of security and control, a need for belonging and purpose. As a culture, we share common values and norms that we want to impart to our children as well. We create laws by which to order our lives. Throughout our life cycle we take on different roles and responsibilities and often define

ourselves by these roles and accomplishments. All this is part of our experience. The trouble comes when we over-identify as individual beings or members of a tribe and with our perceived “reputation, self-image, role, possessions, money, appearance, and so on.”<sup>1</sup> We often let our ego or collective consciousness that tends to experience itself as separate drive our thoughts and actions. Part of loving another is loving the particularity but we are often prone to putting each other in little static boxes. Like the therapist husband, we can get quite self-assured about the judgments we make of each other, not just in our intimate relationships.

Our faith calls us to move beyond this. In our passage for today, Isaiah writes that God is sending a servant whose work it is, “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from their dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Is. 42:7). As Christians, we identify Christ as this servant (though this is not contextual for Isaiah). Christ serves God known to offer healing and liberation throughout the ages, especially but not only where people are suffering as the result of other’s wrong doing. God is not blind to people who are abused, oppressed and exploited for other people’s needs and wants.” The passage is also a reminder that we are all facing a measure of blindness and stuck-ness in our lives. We can quickly get stuck in our assumptions about each other (i.e. our story between husband and wife). We may be so sure of ourselves that we understand another person, a politician, or a country that we keep each other in virtual prisons.

Our psychologist husband at least worked to detect some nuances in his perceptions of his spouse but in times of struggle, we tend to seek refuge in our own certitudes. We have lived through a week of heightened tensions between the USA and Iran and will likely see hostilities continue in a variety of ways. Proxy attacks killed US service members just yesterday. Iranians have been trampled during a funeral march, and people representing many countries died when their plane was mistakenly hit by an Iranian missile shortly after take-off. These current tensions show how often we are driven by competing ideologies and competition. It’s a game of honor and shame, dominance and submission, victory and defeat, and sometimes even a glorified game of chicken. People are dying because of it! We are sowing seeds of further

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr’s “Daily Reflection” for January 10, 2010 ([www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)).

separation and conflict because we are not existentially in touch with the fact that we do belong to each other in God's big picture, in God's very being.

Today, we heard the story of Jesus' baptism according to Matthew. Celebrating the gift of Baptism is one of the sacraments of the church that invites us into a consciousness that offers a broader and more grounded perspective. When Jesus as the Christ is baptized, he models for us the affirmation of a different consciousness and way of being and perceiving altogether. He lives it out with his whole life, death and resurrection and shows us a pathway for our lives. More on this in a little while.

Let us first look to how the Prophet Isaiah who spoke hundreds of years before Jesus' birth can frame this perspective. Isaiah writes that it is God who "created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it" (Is. 42:5). In other words, God is the ground and origin of all that exists. We exist because God pours herself out into us breath by breath. Everything that is comes from and shares in this source of existence and sustenance. We are not independent, self-sufficient beings. This is how God manifests in all that is.

Isaiah writes further, "I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare..." (Is. 42:9). Isaiah is announcing a new and more inclusive and expansive vision and understanding. He is also warning us to let go of false idols. These include our ideologies and self-serving or self-defeating ambitions. We are still on the journey of opening to the new things God has declared of old.

As you may know, a group has been meeting after the service for the past few weeks to read Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. One of the teachings that resonated with all of us was the notion of *interbeing*. Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example of a flower to help us understand what is meant by this: *When we look into the heart of a flower, we see clouds, sunshine, minerals, time, the earth, and everything else in the cosmos in it. Without cloud, there could be no rain, and there would be no flower. Without time, the flower could not bloom. In fact, the flower is made entirely of non-flower elements; it has no independent,*

*individual existence. It 'inter-is' with everything else in the universe.*<sup>2</sup> This is how God manifests in a Christian incarnational worldview as well. We all inter-are. We are completely dependent on countless elements to come together to sustain us into existence at every moment. Old cells are constantly dying off and new cells are being formed not because of our brilliance or hard work or the size of our pocket book but because this is how God pours God's self out.

This outpouring is at the heart of our notion of the Trinity in whose name we baptize. God as father or mother is the intimately engaging creating force pouring itself out into the son/child.<sup>3</sup> When the prologue of John's Gospel calls Christ the logos (meaning ordering principle) at the heart of all creation, he is saying that even before Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth, this Christ energy was already becoming flesh, becoming manifest in the created world by this outpouring of life from father/mother into child/Christ. The child pours themselves out in love to the parent. Jesus of Nazareth embodied this loving identity by living a life in which the unity of matter and spirit was fully alive, touchable, visible, and tangible. He poured himself for and as God out by loving all he encountered.

We also say that the power and energy of love between father/parent and son/child flows into us as the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the truth and primacy of this loving exchange at the heart of God and our real identity when we baptize in the name of parent, child and Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> This Holy Spirit keeps us connected with this on-going flow and exchange of love. We affirm in our baptism that we devote ourselves to living by this Spirit and will practice faithful living through the ways we treat each other and creation as a whole. Baptismal language speaks of working for the healing and liberation already proclaimed in Isaiah and long before that. We profess in our baptism that we are a part of the flow of love at the heart of God though we may refuse it or ignore it consciously or unconsciously in our day to day existence. Our constant invitation by the Holy Spirit is to trust that our identity does not finally rest in our ego and all its ideas about itself. This is why the apostle Paul referred to his identity of living a baptized life as now living *in*

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<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Riverhead Books: NY, 1995) 11.

<sup>3</sup> We could call "son" the incarnate presence in loving relationship with the creating source.

<sup>4</sup> I believe that the names father and son are place holders pointing to the depth of the relationship and not the gender identity of God.

*Christ*. Galatians 2:20 says, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”<sup>5</sup> Our “I” is part of God’s great “I am” identified as outpouring love into life and through death and into life over and over again.

When we begin to look at our lives as being so interdependent and given and sustained as a gift, it becomes more difficult to dismiss each other as enemies, to make idols of our ideologies of right and wrong or superior and inferior. It also becomes harder to dismiss ourselves as somehow unworthy, unredeemable, outcast, broken beyond repair. Notice how Isaiah also reminds us that when it comes to God, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench (Isaiah 42:3).” To God, we are each the “Son/daughter/child, the Beloved, with whom [God] is well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Let us help each other live into this identity rather than create obstacles through our limiting ideas and judgments. Let us seek to stay in the flow of discovery open to surprise, not-knowing, and seeking to bring out the best in each other, not our worst. The work of transformation is always before us even after 25 years of marriage or centuries of tense international relationships! May we be blessed with an ever-deepening embrace and awareness of the power of love that gives of itself without fear of diminishment.

Let me close by sharing a poem by the Sufi master Hafiz which expresses this self-giving love:<sup>6</sup>

Even  
After  
All this time  
The sun never says to the earth,  
“You owe  
Me.”  
Look what happens

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<sup>5</sup> This why Paul also says that we can do all sorts of amazing things but if we don’t have love, we are long a noisy gong (1 Cor 13).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Ladinsky, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz*, “The Sun Never Says”(Compass: NY, 1999) 34.

With a love like that,  
It lights the  
Whole  
Sky.

God sustains us every moment. May our lives also be blessed with the mutual embrace of such radiance. May we exude gratitude and awe. All thanks and praise be to God.