

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**January 10, 2010**  
**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**“Choosing Back...”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Last Sunday after our worship service, the first Sunday of the New Year, the first Sunday of a new decade, I received a lovely gift. The kind of gift pastors LOVE to receive. After our service, and after the line at the door when I got to greet and hug all of you one by one, I went into the Dining Room to relax and EAT! And while there, very focused on my cookies and tea, Coni Gilman-Solomon came up to me. Our Coni, our precious Coni.

She looked at me with an intense look in her eyes.

“Pastor Andrea,” she said rather softly. “Can I talk to you?”

I was sort of focused on my cookies and tea but that look tipped me off that something important was happening with our Coni.

“Sure,” I said and I stood up. Coni leaned into my face and her look got even more intense.

“I want to know if you will baptize me,” she said with a serious tone in her voice.

“Can you do that?”

I grabbed her up and hugged her and said “Yes yes yes yes! You’ve never been baptized? Sure I can baptize you! This is fabulous!”

It is fabulous when an adult who has never been baptized feels the call, the pull, the desire and the readiness to be baptized. And at 47, our Coni is an adult who is feeling the call, the pull, the desire and the readiness to be baptized. Praise God!

Apparently when Coni was young, her parents wanted her and her siblings to grow up and then decide if being baptized was something they wanted to do, something they believed in, something they CHOSE. Coni remembers her Nana, gone now some 25 years, telling her: “When you’re ready Coni, you’ll know it.”

Coni and per partner Kayla and their daughter Tayla found this Church almost a year ago, Coni found God again, Coni and her family found a loving community here, and Coni has been slowly moving toward this decision to be baptized.

Coni and I met for supper this past week and decided that we would prepare for her baptism during Lent, meeting and talking about her spiritual journey and what the sacrament means. Then Coni will be baptized here in our Church on Easter morning in our worship service. Coni and Kayla and Tayla and Coni's Dad will all stand with her as she receives this sacrament and gets good and wet when I splash her with holy water.

This is a gift because when an adult asks to be baptized, it is tangible evidence for a pastor of someone's spiritual growth, it is rewarding because it makes a pastor think that all our work and all our words and all our invisible praying and hoping, like casting bread on the waters, is actually making a difference. And the prayers and the sermons and the community building and the programs and the general church-y-ness made a difference in someone's life. Someone was awake. Someone was paying attention. Someone wants to be baptized.

The rest of the Coni story is that I went home last Sunday and in the afternoon thought I would just glance at the Lectionary reading for today. My sermon was over, my work for that day was done, I thought I would just peek at the reading I would be preaching on one week later...and there it was: the Baptism of Jesus. Wow I thought. There are no coincidences, only grace.

And so today we lift up Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer in the River Jordan some 2000 years ago. And we lift up Coni's soon-to-be baptism in a few weeks. And we reflect on Baptism....

What did Jesus' baptism mean?

What will Coni's baptism mean?

Why is baptism one of only two sacraments recognized by the United Church of Christ?

Let's start with Jesus' baptism as described in the Book of Luke, the passage we just heard read by Annie. Although this is a very significant event, Luke takes a minimalist approach. In fact Luke devotes a total of seven words to the actual baptism of Jesus—seven words for this momentous occurrence.

“Now when all the people were baptized, AND WHEN JESUS ALSO HAD BEEN BAPTIZED...” that's it. Don't look for more. That's the actual baptism.

Luke does not dress it up, embellish or explain...no, no.

He simply has Jesus lined up with the rest of the great unwashed. “...when all the people were baptized...” John is baptizing people right and left. And Jesus in an almost anonymous fashion lines up too, to take his turn...

to wade in that muddy river, to present himself—like the others—to be baptized by this wild man John. This is an understated version of the baptism of Jesus. Luke allows no fanfare until Jesus has been baptized, is off praying and the heavens open. THEN the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice from the heavens says those precious and powerful words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The reason that baptism (like communion) is one of only two sacraments recognized by the United Church of Christ is because we accept as sacraments ritual actions which, according to Scripture, were instituted by Jesus himself. The Bible says Jesus was actually baptized. And so we consider that a sacrament and carry on that ritual in his name, to this day. Communion is a sacrament because the Bible says Jesus, on the last day of his earthly life, actually took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his companions and said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

So when Coni is baptized on Easter morning, when any person young or old is baptized throughout the year, we are carrying on an ancient tradition that began in the Holy Land millennia ago.

Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. It is a time of being joined with the universal church, the body of Christ. In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the Spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God’s people always. That is what baptism IS.

Now let’s talk about what baptism is NOT.

Baptism is not the moment when you are finally saved.  
Baptism is not the time when God begins to love you or loves you suddenly more.  
Baptism is not the hour when God claims you as God’s own.  
Baptism is not the dividing line between real Christians and unreal Christians.

God loves all God’s people, God loves all of us, God began to love us when we were knit together in our mother’s womb, as we hear so beautifully written in Psalm 139. God loves us and does not make a distinction between those baptized and those not baptized.

God has already chosen you and God loves you.  
Baptism is the moment when YOU chose back.  
God’s arms are outstretched, God is loving you, powerfully loving you.

And in baptism your arms are outstretched and you are choosing back.  
God has already said YES and in baptism you are saying YES right back.

We perform baptisms in community so others can witness that you are saying YES, a big wet YES right back to God.  
You are baptized into the family of God so the family of God has to be present.  
There are no private baptisms. You are publicly declaring  
I am God's and God is mine and I want you all to mark this day with me.  
And the family of God essentially says: We're here, we see you, this is good!  
Amen!

Baptism is a gigantic affirmation: God has always been there loving and present.  
And in baptism the person gets to essentially shout out: I am here too, count me in!  
I am yours and you are mine! Praise the Lord!

In June 2008 at the All Church Picnic at Look Park, I took Bonnie and Alice by the hands and we waded into the Mill River next to the Pavilion where the picnic was held. And I spoke to them about God's love for them and their love for God. And I asked Bonnie and Alice if they were ready to claim God as their God and to publicly witness to their faith. And they said yes. And I bent down and scooped up the cool, refreshing water of the Mill River and I poured that water, three times, on their precious heads and I pronounced that they were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Mother to us all.

And maybe if we had not been singing and crying and laughing and splashing around we would have heard a voice from the heavens say, "You are my beloveds, with whom I am well pleased." I believe God says that to us—to each baby, each young person, each adult who is baptized. "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

God does not say, "Now you are my beloved...."  
Or "you are finally my beloved...."  
Or "you took this important step and so I love you and am pleased."

We ARE God's beloved with whom God is well pleased. We are chosen by God when we are swimming and baptized in the water in our mother's womb. A formal Church baptism is when we choose back! God loves us, baptized or not—in fact God delights in us.

Poet and philosopher John O'Donohue says, "May you learn to see yourself with the same pride, delight and expectation that God sees you at every moment."

God delights in us and when we are baptized we are delighting in God right back.

So who can be baptized in the United Church of Christ?

Infants, children, young people and adults.

And maybe cats. In the book Gilead, which our Church Book Group read together, the protagonist in the story, an old retired minister, talks about when he was a kid he and some of his friends (from pious families he notes) baptized a litter of cats. The girls put each kitten in a doll's dress, one at a time, and the old minister (then a child) "moistened their brows, repeating the full Trinitarian formula."

The old minister reflects back on that time of baptizing the cats and says, "I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It does not enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that."

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Yes baptism is a blessing, an acknowledgement and a choosing back....delighting in God who is delighting in you.

I remember just before I was ordained, a Yale Divinity School professor of mine who was helping me prepare said to me, now Andrea you must watch your words: for your words will influence people;  
your deeds: for your deeds will serve as a model for others;  
and your hands: for your hands will baptize babies.

I think about that often. And I think about my grandfather's hands, the Rev. Antranig Arakel Bedikian...his beautiful hands... and how some 58 years ago he took my small body in his hands and he baptized me.

Now these hands, that baptized Bonnie and Alice, Parker, Cherylynn, Lucia, Jacob, Haley, Mary Meg, Nicholas, Tatum, Will, Jayden, Liliana, Shelby so many more of God's beloved sons and daughters, these hands will baptize Coni on Easter morning after we have sung "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today."

And on that fine morning I will remind Coni that her Nana said that when Coni was ready to be baptized she would know it. And I will ask Coni if she is ready to be baptized and if she really knows it.

And I will tell Coni that God loves her. And I will invite Coni to proclaim, with all of you as witnesses, all of you here as the family of God, I will invite Coni to proclaim that she loves God right back.

And let the people say Amen.

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