

## Baptism and the Spirit

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Celebrating the Baptism of Christ  
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**Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

“[H]e will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” -- Mark 1:8

We all want to be accepted. We're hard wired for it. Human beings, like most other mammals, are social creatures. We're born into groups and we live in groups and we want to be accepted by our groups. Starting with that small group of mother and child, we gradually grow into recognizing our membership in other, ever-enlarging groups: our families, our playmates, our classmates, our neighbors, our fellow-citizens. Most thinkers on moral and spiritual development have come to the conclusion that one of the most accurate indicators for an individual's or group's spiritual and moral development is their sense of belonging to ever-widening circles – that such people and such groups see themselves as accepting and being accepted by not just their family or their religion or their political party or their country, but by the entire world, all of creation, and ultimately, by God.

Isn't this what we've all seen in recent decades on the news? Think of all those shooting rampages that cause us such pain and re-ignite our debates about the presence of guns in our society. As the profile of the shooter gradually emerges, the same old sad picture emerges: a lonely misfit, angry at the world, increasingly isolated and absorbed in his own morbid fantasies and sense of personal grievance. You never hear of a well-adjusted person – that is, someone who feels accepted by others and accepts them -- going in and shooting up a high school or post office or Walmart.

I had lunch recently with two friends and colleagues, Lois Annich and Kelly Brill, to talk about clergy burn-out. Lois is the Minister for Pastoral Care at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights, and Kelly is the pastor of our church in Avon Lake. Lois also has a private practice as a pastoral counselor, and one of the points she made in our conversation was about people's desperate need for acceptance. “How different the world would be,” she said, “if people actually accepted the fact that God has accepted them. That's what the gospel is all about.” And I wanted to stand up in the middle of the restaurant and shout “Amen! You preach it, sister!”

That, friends, is indeed what the Christian gospel is all about: You have been accepted by God and Jesus calls you to accept your own acceptance. That is what the whole scriptural story keeps saying, over and over again. That's the message all our doctrines, rituals, and theological systems: God has accepted you by creating you, God has accepted you by redeeming you, and God continues to accept you throughout this life and even beyond it by sustaining you. Business gurus say it all comes down to location, location, location. We in the church business say it all comes down to acceptance, acceptance, acceptance. Practicing our own acceptance by God by living

that same acceptance in the presence of others. That's all the Christian story finally amounts to in the day to day.

And how hard it is to do! Many of us bring to adulthood such scars from childhood that we make dreadful decisions and continue to be our own worst enemies. The devil is a rank amateur compared to the harm and pain we inflict on ourselves. No one will ever treat us as badly as we treat ourselves, which is why Jesus said the second great commandment is that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves – love ourselves. Not pamper ourselves. Not spend our lives in self-absorption or self-pity, but love ourselves as God loves us, which is the same way that God loves everyone and everything. I'm sure most millionaires and billionaires consider their personal fortunes to be the sign of their love for themselves and their families, but I think they're mistaken. Self-indulgence is not the same thing as love. Genuine love, the love that is of God and is God, is self-emptying love, not self-directed love. When we give ourselves away – not with a price-tag attached to every single book or book signing or video or guest appearance or show taping – but actually just give ourselves away, we come closest to loving ourselves and others as God has loved us. And that's when we are able to accept who we are and what we are. And if that acceptance happens, we have not ourselves to thank, but the Holy Spirit, because that's what the Spirit does.

Today we celebrate baptism and the Spirit, taking our guidance from the story of Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit on him in that event. Those famous words with which that story ends -- "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" -- are not those the words of acceptance that set the pattern for our own lives as Christians? Are not those the words of acceptance, in one variation or another, we all long and need to hear? That God has accepted us, that God is pleased with us, and that our ministries and true lives begin from that point of departure?

Baptism does not make us acceptable to God; that's a grave distortion of the gospel that makes our acceptance by God dependent upon our own works. Lots of folks over the centuries have fallen into that trap. They don't believe God accepts them until they do something first, like accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior and become baptized Christians.

I don't believe that. I used to, but I don't anymore. God accepts us first, and through the Holy Spirit we accept the way of Jesus Christ as our way, as our loving response to the love we have already received. I believe it is the Holy Spirit who allows us to accept the way of the cross and resurrection as our way because everything natural, social, and cultural tells us otherwise. The self-sacrificial way of life we see in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus is not rational, reasonable, or natural. It goes against everything every culture has taught in human history. It flies in the face of that basic instinct of self-preservation. And for that reason, I believe it is spiritual – it is transcendent, it comes from God – and the Christian church has always held up that spiritual reality as its ideal and its only reason for existence.

It sounds like such a downer when you put it like that – self-sacrifice. Images of "Saving Private Ryan" and that sort of thing. But to experience the gospel as gloomy and painful misses the underlying reality of the gospel, which is acceptance. It is accepting our own acceptance by God that frees us to accept the way of Jesus as our way. When you truly accept that the most important thing that can ever happen to you already has happened to you – that you have been accepted by God – then trying to secure all of the other things that make us feel accepted – family, career, youth, beauty, ability, money – all of that fades in comparison. And with that awareness of profound freedom comes joy.

One of the most famous sermons of the great twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich is "You Are Accepted," and I would like to close our reflections about baptism and

the Holy Spirit with Tillich's words about grace. When we allow our lives to be touched by grace, Tillich says,

we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement [between us and the Ground of our being]. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*.

Dear friends in Christ, if you want to change the world in 2012 – or 2013 or 2029 – accept that you have been accepted by God and live as one accepted. We are all God's beloved children, in whom God is well pleased. Let's live as though we actually believed that.