

## Beloved

Mark 1: 4-11; Jan. 7, 2017; Union Congregational United Church of Christ

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Today's scripture text of the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John the Baptizer – particularly appropriate as we have reenacted that ritual today with the baptisms of Collette and Barrette - is a reminder to us – if we needed a reminder directly after the earthiness of a baby born in a stable – of the down to earth nature of the gospel. It sometimes seems that over the centuries – we've attempted to sanitize and soften and make more holy and thus less earthy - the gospel – and in this bit of text, we get a reminder that it's a lot more gritty than that.

Baptism is grounded in very real, tactile, sensual images. In these few words from the gospel of Mark, we are reminded of the sights and smells and sounds of river water, the feel and smell of clothing made from camels skin, a certain dis-taste for a diet of insects, the body movements involved in the tying of shoes, and all the possibilities of a bird divebombing from the skies.

Earthiness and the Spirit go together. Spirit while defined as invisible is always tied to real, tangible, material things – real water, real bread, real wine or juice, real baptismal clothing for our children.

Baptism is defined by a UCC Confirmation resource as 'the sacrament through which God's grace, love, claim, and covenant are expressed to a person and through which that person is incorporated into Christ and the church.' Spirit, in the same resource is defined as 'the breath of life, the soul; the Holy Spirit.'

Every year, on this first Sunday following Epiphany, as we prepare once more to read through the year, the story of Jesus' life and ministry, we begin with this story of Jesus' baptism. In our memories, we've made it into a pretty story – a nice story – that goes well with our reenacting it with adorable babies and attractive adults. And yet, it probably isn't meant to be quite like that. The gospel of Mark – the abrupt, blunt gospel – reminds us that what happened is more earth shattering – more earthy – more poignant. We have John the Baptizer – earthy enough – camel skin clothing and bug breath.

We have the muddy Jordan river – not so sweet smelling probably. We have that dove bombing dove. And God’s voice – loud and booming? Or softer?

People were hungry and thirsty for something new. They were anxious and eager to experience a new day – that had been long promised to Israel. And now here is this powerful preacher from the wilderness telling them to get ready for it. So they flocked to the river, closer to wilderness than a nice clean temple – seeking forgiveness for their sins – and a chance to get closer to God.

This was a radical act – because a fringe prophet had no business taking on the work of the priests of the temple. And Jesus, by being baptized here – embraced the radical begun here.

I sometimes wonder if families coming forward to baptize their babies have any idea how radical this act really is. This presenting ones beloved children to have a fresh start – a spirited holy new beginning – as a beloved child – given over to become part and parcel of God’s beloved community.

This is the fresh start we all seek isn’t it? And yet, once we are baptized, we need never again repeat it. So where do we find our fresh start? Every year as we remember Jesus’ baptism, every single time, we baptize a new one into the faith of this community – we remember our own baptisms – we remember the promises made on our behalf – or the promises we made. We remember the promises made by godparents, and family members. We remember the promises made by congregation members. And that is not to be taken lightly. Those promises make up our covenant - the three way covenant: the person being baptized, the congregation, God. It’s a three legged stool – the sturdiest of footings on which to ground our faith.

Every baptism reminds us that we in the church are part of an ancient renewal movement. In a world filled with hatred and violence, there’s a lot more going on here than an occasion for gifts and cute photos.

There is perhaps no more meaningful experience in the life of a pastor than a baptism – when water – immersed in hopes and dreams and prayers – is poured over the head of the one to be baptized and reminding us all with the words, “In this place, water is thicker than blood.”