

“Blessed to be a Blessing,”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI

Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17 Sermon
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For Private Distribution Only

A little over two weeks ago, we celebrated Jesus’ birth together. This past Thursday was Epiphany, when the Magi—the three wise men--came to the stable to offer precious gifts to the infant Jesus. And, once they had departed, the holy family fled into Egypt to escape threats on the infant’s life by a crazed King Herod who feared his power would be usurped by a tiny, newborn messiah...

And then, today, with nothing in the way of a segue, here we are, witnessing Jesus’ baptism. Even if we were talking about an infant baptism, two weeks would be a little early. But, no, Jesus was clearly an adult, a consenting adult. The author of the gospel of Matthew has fast forwarded us to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry with nary a summary of his childhood... Life can feel a little like that sometimes, I suppose. I can remember standing as godmother at my niece Aiyana’s dedication like it was yesterday. And here I have just spent my Christmas holiday with a 12-and-a-half-year old who has strong opinions of her own, a well-developed, deadpan sense of humor, and an *almost* woman’s body. Just like that. In the blink of an eye. We can only imagine what it must feel like for God to watch Jesus, then two thousand years of Christians, and now us grow into our lives and our ministries!

Baptism is one of just two sacraments celebrated in the United Church of Christ. The second is communion. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of the invisible grace that is bestowed upon *each one of us* by God. Unlike communion, which Jesus instructed us to do often, we need only be baptized once to acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s presence within and upon us and our

lives, God's promises to us, and our acceptance into the loving family that is the Church with both a big and a little "C." Yet, even if we must only do it once, it bears reminding. And perhaps especially if we were presented to God and the Church by our parents as young children or infants and have little or no memory of the highly memorable event. And so we can occasionally celebrate *not rebaptism* but renewal of those everlasting baptismal promises. But we can also remember, experience God's grace, and give thanks for that *first sacrament* whenever we approach the communion table and partake of the *second sacrament*.

Years ago, my family was going through an especially challenging time. My mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, a disease that had taken her own mother's life a decade or so earlier. Mom underwent a lumpectomy and then a mastectomy. I brought my publishing work home from Colorado to Maine to be with her and my family over those two months. And then we all walked on egg shells as she began a regimen of Tamoxifen, not knowing what the outcome would ultimately be.

This was challenge enough for the adults, but, for my young niece, I can barely imagine. For a preschooler, it seemed, my niece had spent entirely too much time with her grandparents in doctors' offices, hospital rooms, and waiting rooms. But, beyond that, up until this point, Grammy Reynolds had been Aiyana's sole daycare provider. And now Grammy was in no position to play that role any longer. Everything was changing, and everybody was acting funny and very serious. Perhaps not surprisingly, Aiyana began to have angry outbursts around this time. But even as we all grew concerned for her emotional welfare, my niece, wise beyond her years, grasped for what she knew to be true beneath the veneer of her own and our family's fear and anxiety. She began to ask my sister and brother-in-law to replay family videos from her

infancy. And there she found the comfort and the healing she needed in images of simpler, more secure times. Times when the abundant unconditional love that always surrounded her was undeniably obvious—visible and physically palpable...

This is what it can be like to recall our baptisms. To remember who and whose we are. Not so much a security blanket as a touchstone that has the power to take us back...and move us forward...in our lives and our innermost identities. Washing away the soot and the tears that accumulate as we journey together along the dusty roads of our years on earth... And for those of us who have not yet been baptized, that experience is available to us still. We are never too old or too worldly to approach the baptismal font and formally acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and our beings. To accept the blessing and the affirmation of God's words of old, "This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now I know some of us were raised with slightly less affirming views of baptism. The focus may have been almost exclusively on the washing away of sin and, in the case of infant baptisms, on cleansing newborn souls of Original Sin, a doctrine introduced to the Church not through the bible, but a few hundred years later by St. Augustine of Hippo. A concept that, regrettably, has been shaming people ever since... I believe one of the greatest gifts our UCC denomination has to offer is its focus on a still-speaking God, a God whose revelation is ongoing and active in our world today. We are granted permission and even encouraged to reframe what have proven over time to be harmful doctrines into *life-giving* ones. Matthew Fox, a former Catholic turned Episcopal priest, has done just that by recasting Augustine's concept of Original Sin as Original Blessing. Taking us back to Genesis, Fox reminds us that, in the beginning, as God brought the earth and all its inhabitants—plant, animal, and human—into being, God declared each and

every one of them not deeply flawed nor incomplete nor dirty but, quite simply, good. And as that creation evolved over the eons and each of us came into being, so too we were deemed good and beloved and a pleasure for our Creator to behold.

Given what we know of human nature and man's tremendous inhumanity to man today and throughout history, this may sound terribly naïve. And yet our Creator knows us inside and out. This good, this blessing, is at once our roots...and our potential. The very structure of the United Church of Christ acknowledges this: Autonomy and covenant are built into each level of our denomination. Demonstrating faith in the inherent abilities of the children of God to work together independently and collectively for the good of all. And this is precisely what God has made and blessed us for—to follow in Jesus' footsteps as beloved children of God who grow into trusted servants of God. God doesn't promise it will be easy. After all, the very next event in Matthew's gospel is Jesus' temptation by Satan. Jesus was not spared that challenge and neither will we be. But God does promise to be always present to us and to provide support and reminders along the way. Bread crumbs to help us recall who and whose we are.

For those of you who may have wondered, at the time of her birth, my niece's name was thought to mean "eternal blossom" in Cherokee. I'm now reading that the name Aiyana may actually have Ethiopian and even Hindu roots, but that's okay. She is eternally cherished, beautiful, and growing in whatever language or faith, as are you and all that God has created and continues to create.

I'd like to close with a blessing from Celtic author John O'Donohue and an invitation:

As you come forward to receive communion, you are invited to dip your fingers into the baptismal font's waters to recall the Creator's life-giving force, the Spirit's grace and love, and the dance of Christian life into which your very birth invites you to join with the Spirit of the Still-Speaking God and the people alike.

For Belonging

May you listen to your longing to be free.

May the frames of your belonging be generous enough for your dreams.

May you arise each day with a voice of blessing whispering in your heart.

May you find a harmony between your soul and your life.

May the sanctuary of your soul never become haunted.

May you know the eternal longing that lives at the heart of time.

May there be kindness in your gaze when you look within.

May you never place walls between the light and yourself.

May you allow the wild beauty of the invisible world to gather you, mind you, and embrace you in belonging.

(From To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings by John O'Donohue, Doubleday, 2008)

Amen.