



Sermon, July 16, 2017
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Junction City United Methodist Church

“Welcoming and Blessing”

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Realities of new babies.

Birth customs, all wanting somehow to welcome this child into the world and into our families and community:

- **Dagara people of Burkina Fasso (from Malidoma Somé):** In our village everyone gets excited when they hear a woman is pregnant. Everyone asks, "Why is this person being sent to us at this time? What gifts will this person have that our community needs?" A special ritual is held to answer these questions. Expert shamans gather with the mother of the fetus and place her under hypnosis. They contact the life-force behind the fetus, asking why it is coming into the world and what work it intends to do."
- **Prayers in UMH # 146**

Dagara believe that each child born brings something special to the village, something needed by the people. Each child is important, significant. And it is truly said that it does take an entire village to raise a child, and the entire village does. Too big a job for just the parents, thus everyone is a parent.

Jesus says "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mk 9:37).

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Today we welcome two new and very young members of our family, just come into this world (or at least much more recently come into the world than most of us). We are connected to these children, we are related. We are all parents and brothers and sisters to this child.

But today we are welcoming these children into our village family in a particular way – the particular way the Christian family welcomes a new member of the family – through baptism. First and foremost, Baptism is something God does – that is what a sacrament is: “Outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, and a means whereby we receive that grace.”

Outward and visible sign is the use of water, reminding us of the waters of birth. In John 3:5, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit.”

Christian commentators down the ages have argued that he is speaking here of baptism. But it is also possible that he is speaking about the normal physical waters of birth, in which we are carried for 9 months in the womb. It is from these waters that we are born into a particular human family.

Baptism recapitulates this birth through the use of water, such that the person baptized is born, or reborn, if you will, into a new life, and a new family – the family of God. The first birth is accomplished through human activity, but the birth symbolized in baptism is actually accomplished by God. This is why it is a sacrament.

The ritual for Baptism tells the story about this new family – what it means to be a member of the family of God. Turn with me to the order of service for Baptism, on p. 39. Basically, it is a story of salvation – that we are members of a salvation family: “We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation.”

Salvation from what? From the old life into the new life. But what is the old life? Page 40 answers this question. Christianity has a very particular understanding of the nature of the world, the nature of the human condition. We are created in the image of God, which is essentially a relationship of intimacy, dependence and trust. But we are unfaithful to

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that relationship with God. The official UM document, “By Water and the Spirit,” states it like this: “Through prideful overreach or denial of our God-given responsibilities, we exalt our own will, invent our own values, and rebel against God. Our very being is dominated by an inherent inclination toward evil which has been traditionally called original sin. It is a universal human condition and affects all aspects of life. Because of our condition of sin, we are separated from God, alienated from one another, hostile to the natural world, and even at odds with our own best selves. Sin may be expressed as errant priorities, as deliberate wrongdoing, as apathy in the face of need, as cooperation with oppression and injustice. Evil is cosmic as well as personal; it afflicts both individuals and the institutions of our human society.”

This is what is addressed on p. 40 with renunciation of sin and profession of faith. But the good news is that we have the freedom and the power to resist evil in all its forms.

Confession of faith. This is the new life, the new family, the family of salvation. This is what we stand for. (Growing up, raised a certain way, “we stand for this...”).

Family responsibilities. I mentioned earlier that we are all parents and brothers and sisters to these children. So how can we be parents worthy of these children? How can we be parents worthy of all our children? How can we welcome these children in the name of Jesus?

1. Take time with them. Listen to them. Play with them.

Charles Francis Adams, 19th century political figure and diplomat, kept a diary. One day he entered: “Went fishing with my son today—a day wasted.” His son, Brook Adams, also kept a diary, which is still in existence. On that same day, Brook Adams made this entry: “Went fishing with my father—the most wonderful day of my life!”

Time with a child is never wasted time. It is blessing time. It is like praying for them put into action. It is what is referred to in the New Testament as “the opportune time,” or *Kairos* time.

2. Encourage them.

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Have you seen the ad on TV that shows various children doing things, and they have things written on their arms: "Tell me you're proud of me." "Say you love me." And the caption goes something like: "Our children don't come with instructions, but if they did, this is what they might say..." It's an ad sponsored by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. We are all sowing seeds, and we all reap the harvest. These children are our children.

3. Spare them:

- From Violence
- From abuse
- From cosmic loneliness

4. Introduce them to all the members of the family – (Story about Greek Orthodox custom after baptism of showing the infant the ikons) bring them to church, teach them about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit. Show them their family.

A number of years ago, Ann Weems wrote the following poem entitled, "Greenless Child:"

I watched her go uncelebrated into the second grade,
A greenless child,
Gray among the orange and yellow,
Attached too much to corners and to other people's sunshine.
She colors the rainbow brown
And leaves balloons unopened in their packages.
Oh, who will touch this greenless child?
Who will plant alleluias in her heart
And send her dancing into all the colors of God?
Or will she be left like an unwrapped package on the kitchen table—
Too dull for anyone to take the trouble?
Does God think we're her keeper?

May none of our children be "Greenless Children." "O Creator, who dost all human beings create, thou hast a great worth on us conferred by bringing us this little child!" Hallelujah! Amen!