

January 14, 2018

“We are Claimed”

Mark 1:4-11

Do you remember your baptism? You may not remember anything about your baptism because many of you were, most likely, babies when you were baptized. You may have a picture from when you were baptized or may still have a baptismal certificate from the church where you were baptized. Baptism is a big occasion not only for those who are baptized but also for their parents and families.

If you were baptized as a youth or a grown-up, I bet it was a very moving moment for you. You will not forget it. You made a decision to be a disciple of Jesus and accepted God’s love, grace and salvation for you and for your life.

If you were baptized as an infant, it means that your parents or sponsors cared about you and loved you so much that they wanted you to be baptized in a church. The love of your family was there in your baptism.

If you were baptized in your youth or adulthood, I’m sure your loved ones surrounded you too - your family and friends.

Whether you were baptized as a baby, a youth or an adult, there was a congregation that welcomed you into the family of God. So in your baptism, you were surrounded by love -- love of your family and friends and of the church family.

Baptism is a very happy occasion for the family of God. We rejoice in anyone’s baptism, don’t we, because one more person became a child of God and was added to God’s family.

I was baptized as a baby. It was very important for me to be baptized in a church for my parents, especially for my mother. I don’t have any memory of my baptism, but I was told that my brother and my sister, who are 10 years and 6 years older than I am and are from my father’s former marriage, were also baptized together with me.

My parents never pushed me for to be confirmed. In this country, when youth get to either 7th grade or 8th grade, usually their parents are approached by the church they belong to, to see whether or not they are interested in sending their youth to Confirmation class.

In Japan, where I grew up, where still 1% or less than 1% of the population are Christians, there is no confirmation class based on age.

When I was 15 years old, I sensed God's presence in my life more personally, accepted God's forgiveness of my sin and decided to be confirmed so that I might confess with my own words that Jesus is my Lord and Savior.

So I joined a baptism/confirmation preparation class, which consisted of two adults and me. Those two men were baptized and I was confirmed by Pastor Phillip Luttio, who was a missionary from American Lutheran Church, at Christmas time in 1969. I will not forget that moment as well as the spiritual experiences I had, which led me to confirmation.

My Confirmation was a happy occasion not only for me but also for my parents and my church family.

After confirmation in my high school days, there was a time when I felt I was backsliding. I don't remember what made me feel that way. Maybe I was not feeling God's presence in my life much. Maybe my prayer and devotional life got dry. I didn't feel as much joy as I felt when I was confirmed. So one day, I approached a "senpai," which means someone older than I or someone who has more experiences than I. Keiko was a year older than I and was baptized a year or two before I was confirmed. So she was my senpai - older in age and who had entered a life of Christian commitment before I did through confirmation.

I asked her whether God still cared about me, whether God was still happy with me and I was still considered a child of God, even though I felt a bit of distance from God. Her answer was: "Once you are baptized, you are a child of God. Nothing will take it away from you. You will never fall from God's grace." And she said, "I hope you will feel better."

I think that's what baptism is all about. God claimed us as God's own in our baptism and nothing will change it and nothing will take it away from us.

Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus didn't need to be baptized because he was sinless, the Son of God, but he equated himself to be with us sinners. That was the starting point of his ministry.

When he rose from the water, the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a dove. And a voice came from heaven, *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (1:11) In his baptism, when he was counted among sinners and when he was to begin his and God’s ministry on earth, God claimed Jesus as God’s Son, the Beloved and the One God is pleased with.

I believe the same thing happens when we are baptized with water and the Spirit. God claims us as God’s sons and daughters, claims us as God’s beloved and claims us as those whom God is pleased with. God claims us through the words said in the liturgy of baptism.

In the service of baptism, the congregation says: **“Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God’s new creation.... We are one in Christ Jesus. With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you as members of the family of Christ.”**

This is a holy covenant. God’s church is happy with those who are baptized and with their joining the family of Christ.

The words in the beginning of the service say; **“Through baptism we are initiated into Christ’s holy church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.”**

However far we may feel slipped away from God, however far we may feel drifted away from God last year, God’s claim is the same: we are God’s beloved, God’s sons and daughters, with whom God delights.

We can start this new year fresh with God’s claim on us. In fact we can start over any time, for the Scripture says, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Let us renew our baptismal vow this morning. Let’s receive water again as a reminder of our baptism... where we started our Christian life. We started our life in Christ surrounded by the love of our family that took us to church for baptism. We were surrounded by the love of the church family, who welcomed us into the community of believers. God’s grace was there that led us to baptism through the love of our family and of the community of believers.

Let us remember that we are claimed by God as God's beloved, sons and daughters with whom God delights.

Let's receive water as a reminder of our baptism. (Deacon Glenn and I sprinkle water to the congregation.)

"Remember your baptism and be thankful"

As the ones claimed by God, let us renew our baptismal vow, using the words said by a minister right after baptism.

"The Holy Spirit work within us, that being born through water and the Spirit, we may be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen."