

Sunday Sermon 01122025 Isaiah 43:1-7, Lk 3:15-17, 21-22

“The Way to Please Our Heavenly Father”

It was about 20 years ago when I first met Mr. K. He was the 55-year-old older brother of Nancy, one of our church members at the time. I met Mr. K at St. John’s Hospital in Oxnard, CA.

He was hospitalized in the late stages of stomach cancer. Although he had attended church for many years in the past, he could not do so recently because he had opened a shop at the indoor swap meet, which kept him busy every Sunday.

I visited Mr. K at the hospital frequently, sharing with him about Jesus—His love for us, His sacrifice on the cross, and the gift of salvation. Two weeks after our first meeting, Mr. K accepted Jesus as his personal Savior. His confession was heartfelt, resolute, and full of passion.

He then requested to be baptized. Lying on his hospital bed, with Nancy and Euni standing beside him as witnesses, I poured holy water over him, laid my hands on his head, and baptized him in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

After his baptism, Mr. K spent his remaining days peacefully, finding comfort in listening to hymns. About 15 days later, Nancy called to tell me that Mr. K’s health had suddenly worsened. Euni and I rushed to the hospital, where we found him struggling to breathe and barely conscious.

We gathered around him and began to sing hymns. As we sang the lines, “Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee; nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!” (#528), he quietly took his last breath.

Why did Mr. K desire baptism on his deathbed? How could I, as his pastor, baptize someone who had never once attended my church?

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, a day when we commemorate the baptism of Jesus Christ. In remembering His baptism, I want to reflect on the spiritual blessings and deep significance that baptism brings to us as believers.

First, the concepts of separation and union are both represented in baptism. To better understand baptism, let's visualize the act of immersion. The typical image that likely comes to mind is a pastor gently lowering someone into a pool of water.

I must confess, I sometimes joke about secretly enjoying the idea of dramatically dunking someone into the water [light humor]. But whether through immersion or sprinkling, baptism is a sacred ceremony for those who confess Jesus as their personal Savior.

According to Romans 6:3–5, the act of being immersed or sprinkled with water in baptism symbolizes the cleansing of sins and the death of our old self, bound by sin. Rising out of the water signifies our resurrection and the birth of a new life in union with Jesus Christ.

Consider the following communal confession of baptism from The United Methodist Church, based on The Book of Discipline (The Confession of Faith of The Evangelical United Brethren Church – Article 6): “Sacraments are means of grace by which God works invisibly in us, quickening, strengthening, and confirming our faith in Him. We believe Baptism signifies entrance into the household of faith and is a symbol of repentance and inner cleansing from sin, a representation of the new birth in Christ Jesus, and a mark of Christian discipleship.”

Through baptism, we are separated from the power of sin and death. At the same time, we are united with Jesus in His resurrection life. Have you been baptized? If so, when? Does the meaning and joy of your baptism still resonate in your heart?

Do you live each day in union with Jesus, able to proclaim that His resurrection is your resurrection? Too often, we let the meaning and power of baptism fade into distant memory. Why do we cling to the sin that was cut off from us when we were baptized?

Both the separation from sin and death, and the union with Jesus and His resurrection life, are the work of Jesus Christ. The joy and power we experience now are only possible because of Him.

The blessings of baptism are His gift to us, a gift that never fades or perishes, regardless of circumstances. Let us continually rely on Him, rejoice in Him, and glorify His name.

Second, although we are baptized only once as a ceremonial act, we continuously experience the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a one-time event in our lifetime, and it remains valid even if performed by another denomination, as long as it is done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Let's reflect on what happened when Jesus was baptized. After His baptism, He prayed, and at that moment, the heavens opened. The Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven spoke words of blessing.

Now, wouldn't it be something if the heavens visibly opened when we were baptized? [light humor] But they did! We just couldn't see or hear it. Just as the Father proclaimed His blessing to Jesus, we can trust that God's blessing also came down to each of us through the Holy Spirit. God lovingly says, "You are my own dear son or daughter. I am pleased with you."

Sometimes, hearing such affirmations—even from our earthly parents—can feel insincere or difficult to accept. But as we mature and perhaps become parents ourselves, we start to understand.

We don't love or take pride in our children solely because of their accomplishments (though it's always a bonus!). We love and are pleased with them simply because they are ours—because we bore and nurtured them.

Similarly, when God's children unite with Him in prayer, the gates of heaven open, and the Holy Spirit descends upon them. In that sacred connection, God speaks His unchanging message of love: "You are my own son or daughter. I am pleased with you."

God is always ready to share this message because He is the Lord who possesses and reigns over all things. So why don't we hear a majestic, God-like voice—perhaps something like James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman—telling us this? It's because we've let go of Jesus' hand.

Picture an electric car in an apartment or retail parking lot, connected to a charging station through a long power cord. The car's battery can only be recharged if it remains connected to the power source. The same is true for us. Only by staying connected to Jesus—by holding His hand—can we receive the power of the Holy Spirit and the abundant blessings of Jesus Christ. (Sing hymn #2248)

Third, we need to reaffirm our own baptisms and encourage others to be baptized as well. Jesus' final words on earth were, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18) In other words, He was saying, "My words are the truth. Apart from me, all else is false." He laid out the conditions for becoming His disciple: be baptized, learn the Word of God, and live according to what you have learned. (Matthew 28:18b–20)

Here before me is the baptismal font. It is said that every time this font is filled with holy water, the angels in heaven sing songs of joy. Baptism is a profound spiritual celebration, witnessed by many, in which new children of God declare their union with the church of Jesus Christ.

I pray that this font will often hold holy water and that we will witness many joyous spiritual celebrations. May it be a place where countless souls find new life in Christ.

Isaiah 43 contains God's promise of salvation to His chosen people, Israel. Yet, this promise is also a gift to those saved through Jesus Christ. It assures us of God's protection, even from the waters and the fire:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze." (Isaiah 43:1b–2)

Where else can we find good news that makes our hearts beat with such hope? No force in the universe can harm us when we belong to the Lord. Our Almighty Creator protects us thoroughly—on earth and in heaven.

But why does God care for us so deeply? What have we done to deserve such love? The answer is simple: it pleases Him that we are His children. We bring Him joy simply by being His. Through baptism, we forsake the path of sin and death, walk the path of resurrection life, and are united with Jesus.

Even in his illness, Mr. K wanted to confess that he was a child of God and be baptized. Though his physical body was frail, his soul longed to live forever with the Lord in heaven. That hope—his greatest and final hope—was unshakable. Nothing could interfere with his faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, it would be wonderful if this story were about the baptism of a young, healthy person who went on to serve in ministry. But my focus today is not on the circumstances of baptism—it is on our union with Jesus Christ. No matter a person's story, anyone who is united with Jesus can be used by God for His purpose and glory.

We must reaffirm the meaning and mission of baptism in our daily lives. Your baptism is not a faded photograph stored in your memory. Baptism is the vivid, living power that unites you with Jesus, bringing renewal, strength, and joy each day.

Believe that you are one with Jesus and a member of God's family. With that assurance, no evil will ever be able to reach you. Amen.

Prayer: "Baptism of the Lord" #253

Reflections and Applications for Today's Sermon:

1) I encourage you to read the Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant on pages 50–53 of the *United Methodist Hymnal* after today's service.

2) Reflect on what your baptismal membership means to your life of faith. What impact does it have on your daily walk with God? Take time to compare your reflections with the teachings of the Bible.

3) If you, a family member, or a friend would like to be baptized, please reach out to Brother Ted or your pastor. They will provide a brief baptismal instruction to prepare for this meaningful step.