

Let me take just a moment or two to express my appreciation and the gratitude of my entire family for all your love and care and concern for us over the past weeks, both in sharing our joy on the birth of Kayleigh Elizabeth, my first grandchild and dad your first great-grandchild and in the sudden and very untimely death of Alan, my sister's husband.

Your messages to us and to Christine, your calls and cards to us and her, your meals and expressions of love and support all mean a lot to us and are entirely expressive of this church family. It is such concern and care for one another and others in need to which God calls us all.

In the movie, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?", Everett, Pete and Delmar are hiding out in the woods, on the run from the law, when they encounter a church congregation going down to the lake to be baptized. Delmar, overwhelmed at the sight, runs into the water and is baptized by the preacher. As he returns to his companions, he declares that he is now saved and that "neither God nor man's got nothing on me now." And then he utters the phrase, "Come on in, boys, the water's fine!"

We have no record that John the Baptist ever uttered the phrase: "Come on in, the water's fine!" but as we know many people, including Jesus indeed came to be baptized in the waters of the River Jordan. This action, Jesus accepting baptism at the hands of John is strange, bizarre, confusing, almost unbelievable. Today I point you to two aspects of what the Baptism of Jesus means to us even here today.

The first aspect is something of what Jesus does for us, the second aspect is more about what we should be doing for Jesus.

#### 1. IN HIS BAPTISM JESUS IDENTIFIED WITH ALL HUMANITY AND WITH US

Writing about this incident in the life of Jesus eminent preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us of the story of Rose Clinton and her daughter, Cecilia, characters in Ann Patchett's book, *The Patron Saint of Liars*. Rose and Cecilia both live at Saint Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers in Habit, Kentucky. Rose is the cook and Cecilia is the darling of the place, petted and mothered by all the young women who will give up their own babies, once they are born, for adoption. One day a new girl comes to the home and mistakes Cecilia for one of the unwed mothers. "I felt like I had just been mistaken for some escaped mass murderer," Cecilia reflects. "I felt like I was going to be sick, but that would only have proven her assumption. No one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them, not even as a joke. The lobby felt small and airless. I thought I was going to pass out."

Cecilia felt this way because she had been mistaken for one of the weak people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives, who had done something then thought of as so shameful that their own families had packed them off to live with strangers until the evidence and result of their failure, could be passed away as if it never really happened. Put in theological terms, Cecilia thought she was going to pass out because she had been mistaken for a sinner, when she had done no wrong.

The very opposite kind of thing happened the day that Jesus showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John. The place was teeming with sinners—faulty, sorry, guilty human beings—who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. The folks who were there that day, the day Jesus was there, were the same folks who were there every day – they were the kind of folks who appeared in last week's York County Police Blotter – they had been guilty for sure of DUI, writing bad checks, petty larceny, assault. Some were notorious, habitual sinners, and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. Knowing they

were not innocents they had come to be cleaned, they were willing to accept the invitation, "'Come on in, the water's fine!'".

Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. He was right there in the thick of things, participating in a ceremony for sinners. Jesus' action is a corrective to us in the Christian church who talk a lot about God's love for sinners, but who go to great lengths not to be mistaken for one of them. We seem afraid of guilt by association.

Truth is though, Jesus—our leader and our Lord— Jesus never seemed too concerned about being with sinners! Jesus as God's Emmanuel, God's being-with-us, meant and included Jesus being in the line with us, standing in the river with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life. Jesus accepted the possibility offered by the invite, "Come on in, the water's fine!"

By this action Jesus enlarges our vision in two ways.

Firstly, Jesus is showing us that when we confess our sins here, we do not simply confess our own personal sins but that when we kneel and talk to God we need to be talking about the sins of all humankind. All the things we, as a people, have done and failed to do, all the ways we have fled and are fleeing from the love of God because we are afraid to be really seen, fully known, and inwardly changed. Nothing we do here is only a private matter between us and God.

Secondly, by his Baptism, Jesus is confirming that His place is with us even and especially in our need, in our badness, in our sin, in our need to change direction in life. Thank goodness Jesus stood in the line and waded into the water for it means that Jesus was there and is still there for all of us in our need and hurt and pain.

This is the gift that Jesus' Baptism brings to us but at the same time our sharing in Jesus' Baptism is our **ORDINATION TO SERVICE IN THE CHURCH AND WORLD.**

There is a story that comes from the Canadian Plains, where a church called a new young Pastor – he worked hard - he was a great preacher, and much loved by his congregation. He visited the sick, preached a great sermon, However, his congregation noticed that every day at 3:00 p.m. their Pastor Bob left town – every afternoon at 3 he was gone for one hour, like clockwork. Soon the parishioners became uneasy with Pastor Bob's curious schedule and began to ask questions. They went to the Session with their concerns. "Could the Pastor have a girlfriend in the neighboring town or is he up to no good?" Eventually a couple of the elders decided they would follow the pastor. They drove after him, out of town, to a high hill overlooking the small town and the railroad track that ran through the valley. After sitting there quietly for some time.....a beautiful silver train streaked through the valley at very high speed.

Turning away the pastor saw them and he said, "Isn't that a beautiful sight?" "Yes," the Elders agreed, "it is a beautiful sight. I will preach a good sermon; care for the sick; baptize your children; marry your daughters; bury those who die but no one is going to stop me coming out here to the see the "Silver Bullet". It is the only thing moving around here that I don't have to push!!"

The Spirit descends on Jesus at his baptism to equip him for ministry. In that same moment the Spirit descends upon the whole church of Jesus Christ ordaining all of us, all of us to a life of faithful service,

setting us apart as the servants of the serving, living God. Ordaining not just Pastors, not just Associate Pastors, not just Church Staff, not just elders and deacons, but all who come to trust in Jesus Christ.

As the first waters moved from chaos to order under the action of God, so in the waters of the Jordan minister to us the loving purposes of God. "You are my son" the words spoken to Jesus as He comes out of the water are the words of ordination that echo ancient words spoken to the king in Psalm 2. These words "You are my son", "You are my daughter" are for Mark the central Christian confession. They will be repeated at Jesus' transfiguration and reaffirmed by the Roman soldier at the crucifixion. The words, "You are my son in whom I am well pleased," are taken from the divine call of the servant in Isaiah 42:1. For Jesus, His baptism was His commissioning by God for service.

For all of us who are baptized it is in our baptism that our identities are fixed, and fixed not so much by some action we perform as by God's action. In baptism God declares "You are mine; I am for you." The baptized may run from God, may even mock and ridicule the new and fixed identity given by God. But God's word is sure, "You are my Beloved." In our Baptism we are commissioned and enabled to be servants together, servants together with the one in whose name we serve, servants together with one another and all who share our faith; servants together with those we serve, people just like us who need to know that they matter, who lack love or who need our care.

Jesus' identity is fixed in this obedient humbling of himself. He is true God, but he is God for us. He is true God, even as he is truly and fully human. He can no more abandon his identity as God than he can abandon his humble identification with us. He does not take on the role of Savior only to take off that role when it becomes a burden. He is obedient unto death, but he is God obedient unto death. Jesus jumped into the water with us and for us .... And Jesus asks us today to take the plunge ourselves and in so doing set out to live and serve, to act and be.

Our identity as sisters and brothers of Christ, servants together in the church and community is the heart of what our faith needs to mean if it is to grow. Our Christian identity does not come from the land of our birth, it does not come because we come from a Presbyterian or a Methodist or Baptist or Catholic or Lutheran family, it does not come because we try to be or are good people. Our Christian identity comes because Jesus stepped into the water and now Jesus asks us to live out this as our identity as Christian people in the way we live, in the priorities we set, in the values we hold, in the response of faith we make.

Today we ordain and install the new class of Officers, twenty two members of our congregation called by God, elected by vote of the congregation, trained and examined for their two year term of service. It can be easy for all the rest of us to imagine that the officers and the staff run the church and make everything happen. This is NOT true! By our Baptism all of us are on call, all of us are front and center.

All of us have something to give, to do, to offer. All of us have something to give, to do, to offer that only we can give or do or offer.

This week at Friendship Fellowship and at the Officer's Retreat I heard of a time when this church was on fire.... The church was on fire at some point back in the 1920's or 30's.... quite literally the church was on fire.... By our involvement, focus and participation, by each and all of us living out our baptismal identity I believe that once again we might and will and hope we can say once again that OAPC is on fire...on fire as we live our faith.

As we embark on the journey which is the year 2012 I ask all of you here today and all members of Oakland Avenue to rally to the cause and the work and the opportunities that lie before us. Called by God, commissioned by our baptism, there is much for us to do, to be about, to share and to give. In this New Year all of us are needed, all of us can make a difference, all of us with Jesus. Amen.