

“Baptism of Our Lord”

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the Lord,
The One who created you, O Jacob,
The One who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

What do places like Cheers, The Brick, Central Perk, Arnold's, Moe's Tavern (or the Harmony Bar, the Lake Ripley Cafe or the Mink Farm Tavern) have in common with the local church? They each represent a community gathering place, where to quote the Cheers theme song - "Everyone knows your name."

Over the past two years, due to the pandemic, these gathering places have been, like the church, struggling to provide safe spaces for locals to gather for food, drink, and companionship.

When the pandemic first began and we went into "lock down" many of us learned to navigate and use platforms like Zoom for our gatherings.

These virtual communities were just not the same. We miss being together in person, because as humans we were created to live in community with others.

We have been through so much over the past several years that it feels overwhelmed with fear, concern, stress, anxiety and uncertainty.

At times it has felt like we were to quote Isaiah, walking through fire.

And here we are again, facing the surge of the Omicron variant, forcing schools, churches, social gathering places like restaurants, coffee shops and bars to once again tighten up their COVID protocols to keep everyone safe and healthy.

I am weary and exhausted by it all. I am guessing many of you are feeling the same way.

More than ever, many of us need to feel that sense of community for support, nourishment (spiritual, emotional and mental), and fellowship.

What community once looked like before the pandemic, is not necessarily what it will be like as we come out of this pandemic, and we will, in time, come out of it into a new normal.

So on this Sunday, as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus and remember our own baptisms, I wanted to share some thoughts on what it truly means to be a faith community.

The Sacrament of Baptism, whether as an infant, a youth, or adult, sprinkled or immersed, is never a private affair. It is always to be celebrated in the presence of the community of believers, a church.

Our baptism liturgy includes vows made by the parents on behalf of their child and/or the individual asking to be baptized. And it also has vows for the gathered church, who promise and covenant to help raise, support, love and nurture the newly baptized person as a part of the Body of Christ - the community of believers.

In baptism, we follow Jesus through the waters of baptism, dying with him and rising to new life in and through him, to live as the resurrected community of faith.

The writer Anne Lamott says of this community: **"I think Jesus is divine love manifest on Earth, as it comes through the community of Christians."**

Adding: **"There are these people who keep taking you in and feeding you and loving you and making the world a tiny bit safer than it feels."**

I believe people can find this type of community at their favorite watering hole or coffee shop in addition to a church.

However, as Henri Nouwen says: **"If you start with community and want to be faithful to community, you have to realize that what binds you together is not mutual compatibility or common tasks, but God."**

Nouwen goes on to add: **"community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own."**

I think we all hunger and thirst for such a community. It is why shows like "Cheers" where everyone knows your name and accepts you, quirky and imperfect as we are, for you being you, were popular.

It is why shows like Northern Exposure invited us to gather at The Brick or Friends saved us a place on the couch at Central Perk. We all value a community that accepts us for who we are.

In his writing titled: "*Community Makes God Visible*" Henri Nouwen writes:

"Nothing is sweet or easy about community. Community is a fellowship of people who do not hide their joys and sorrows but make them visible to each other as a gesture of hope. In community we say: 'Life is full of gains and losses, joys and sorrows, ups and downs—but we do not have to live it alone. We want to drink our cup together and thus celebrate the truth that the wounds of our individual lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, become sources of healing when we live them as part of a fellowship of mutual care.'"

Can our favorite bar or coffee shop or diner share these spiritual qualities we tend to think of as only being for the church community? Yes, they can.

Yet, baptism challenges us to think even deeper about what it means to be a part of a community.

In her book, "Re-forming God's People for Praise," Heather Murray Elkins says: "Baptism is an enactment of liberation, effected by water and the Spirit...In place of constricting labels, the community announces us as beloved of God, and pronounces our name."

And the communal name we share is "Christian."

Accepting this name, invites us to go beyond pronouncing it in public, it also invites us to stand with and for those who share our name, even at sacrifice to our own selves.

A guest preacher made this point on Sunday back in the early 1990s, when I served on staff at Northminster in Indianapolis.

He shared his story of immigrating to America with us. Originally from Africa, it was his dream to come to America.

This was his dream but it was not his mother's. She did not want him to come to America. It was the late '60's.

She had seen the images and heard the stories of what some white Americans were doing to black Americans - the dogs, the firehoses, the beatings, the lynchings, the violence.

Though he said he would be safe, she was still afraid.

Back and forth they went until finally he wore her down and she finally consented to his coming to America.

But she said to him before he left home. When you go to America to study and they come for you with their dogs and their fire hoses and their clubs – you run. You run to a church. And when you get to the church, you run into the church, and when you run into the church, you run into the sanctuary. And when you run into that sanctuary, you run to the front of that sanctuary, and you stand under the cross. And when they come into that sanctuary for you, you say to them: “I am a Christian. I was baptized, as you were baptized. I was confirmed as you were confirmed. I am, as you are, a Christian.” Surely, she said, one of them will understand, and come and stand with you.

For me this story illustrates what it means to be a part of a community of faith who makes God visible to the world through their love and service for others.

In baptism, we are called to stand in community with one another regardless of the labels placed upon us by society and religion.

We stand with one another because God first stood with us in and through the person of Jesus the Christ, whose name we bear.

And the name God gives us is the beloved sons and daughters, who in Christ, are named Christian.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as we touch the waters of baptism, remember who you are and whose you are - the Beloved children of God.

Amen.