

Dear Charles
(John 15:1-8; 1 Peter 2: 1-10)

11-12-23
Rev. Koyama

Dear Charles, today on November 12th 2023 you were baptized here at the Congregational Church of Montague.

An Identification with Jesus' Life

You don't know this yet, but you began doing good things in the world the moment you were born. There were some scary moments at first, but they only reminded us of how precious and fragile a gift you are.

I imagine nights when finally all is quiet, when your parents look upon you quietly sleeping, and perhaps a feeling comes over them, like the shepherds had on that silent night in Bethlehem, when all was at peace and they looked upon the wondrous mystery of baby Jesus in the manger.

I imagine that sometimes, as you wobble there, held up by your mother's hand, her heart must sing like the heart of Mary as she anticipates the day when the hint of wisdom in your eyes will emerge and grow until it becomes clear, in what unique way God will love the world through you. How fortunate that you have parents who will dream for your future as Jesus's parents dreamed for him.

And how fortunate, to my mind that, like Mary and Joseph, your parents brought you and your sister Adeline here to the temple, to receive the blessings of the community. Surrounded by love, I foresee the richness of many interactions coursing into your life and nourishing you as you grow, the way the nutrients flow through and ripen a bunch of grapes that draws from the vine that is Jesus' love.

A Universal Baptism

You may wonder how it is that you are loved by so many; even by some who's names you may never know. It is because you have been baptized into a Spirit that loves without boundaries. In fact, your baptism signals that you are part of a family so large that it speaks every language known to humankind – Elamites, Cretans, Cappadocians as the good book says. But also speakers of Spanish, Chinese, English, Swahili...all of this family speaking in their own different tongues, but also in the one true language that unites them in a shared understanding – the language of God's love.

I am also joyful on your behalf this morning, because through baptism, we were able to identify you as a part of this family, something I hope you will someday cherish as a profound gift. You have been given an

identity as a child of God; born into a family of faithful servants, a royal priesthood, ordained to God's purposes.

An Inner Reality

Your baptism is what the church calls "an outward sign of an inner reality." It is an experience of reality that is inescapable and that will be challenging and sometimes even frightening. The reality is that during your life, you will come to encounter the many faces of death!

But it is also a reality in which, if you are faithful to the love of God, God promises to lead you to a victory over your fear. And moreover, God promises that in that victory you will find a life more wonderful than anything you could imagine beforehand. And that it will be a life everlasting whose beauty never ceases; a life in Christ. It is a life that already belongs to you today. But as it is with being part of any family, it will take time to discover the Inner Spirit that gives it life.

A Ritual Drowning

Baptism tells us is that in order to realize that life we must first be drowned; not literally drowned in a pool of water, but undergo an inner experience of being drowned in the "pool of life."

It might be hard to see how baptism symbolizes this drowning, because in the ritual, we only sprinkle some water on your forehead. But that is a nice way of letting you know what is to come.

As a young person starting out in life, you will probably have your own ambitious plans about how you want your life to turn out. You will try hard to make everything go according to your own plans. But you will eventually discover that the world refuses to be as you want it to be. And the more you try to force life into being what you want it to be, the more it will deny you the very things you want most.

And one way we express our disappointment, over this is by saying, “I’m drowning.” Deep down we still want to live. We want our lives to be fulfilled and meaningful. And so we tend to stubbornly double down and struggle harder to make the world meet our needs, believing all the time that the only way to find happiness is to make it happen “my way”. But this only sends us further off the rails.

A Reliable Guide

Until finally we are confronted with a question, “Maybe I should put my trust in something or someone other than myself who knows better. It

is a moment when we ask: “Who will save me, because I can’t save myself?”

It is a very serious question, because putting your life in someone else’s hands can be very dangerous. There are many unreliable guides who can easily lead you out into the desert where you may die of thirst or perish in the swirling waters of confusion.

And this is where the tradition we celebrate today points to Jesus Christ and promises that, if you follow him, he will be your trustworthy guide and lead you to where you need to be.

And strangely enough, when we follow Jesus, the fact that baptism is about drowning is actually reassuring. It is reassuring because it tells us that we are on the right track, that what is happening is what is expected to happen. Baptism is like having a map for following the directions given to us by Jesus, where we can say, “Ok, I know where I am. It looks like I’m entering into a really bad neighborhood now, but that’s what I was told I’d be passing through, so I must be headed in the right direction.”

Not for the Faint of Heart

Because following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. Jesus doesn't tip toe around the hard realities of life or run from the presence of suffering and death. He doesn't make up fantasies about reality, so that he can live in denial.

There are no blinders on Jesus. He meets life head on as someone dedicated to sharing God's love and healing, without running away, because he has total faith in God's power to win the victory over death.

And if we follow him faithfully the blinders will come off for us too. It means dying to our illusions, our denials, our conceits, and our beliefs that anything other than giving ourselves to God's love as Jesus did, can save us.

Accumulating a million dollars won't save us. Winning a popularity contest or being good looking won't save us. Being the smartest person on the block won't save us. Hiding ourselves behind walls to avoid all dangers won't save us. All of those idols that propped up our old selves must be drowned, cleansed, washed away, so that the central concern of our lives can become the sharing of God's love. And the promise and miracle of the Gospel is that this is, in fact the way to salvation.

When the person being baptised comes up out of the waters gasping for air he or she receives it. But that air that is not the same air that she breathed when she went under. And the world that she enters as she rises out of the water is not the same world that she left. That old world has been put to death inside her, and the old self with it.

It is the same world in the sense that there is still suffering and pain and death. But at the same time it is a completely different place; a place where each breath taken is a gift, and not one is taken for granted. And, more importantly, it is a place where you have a new found trust that you will never feel completely alone or abandoned again, because your loving best friend is now somehow with you where ever you go, giving you a sense of security and encouragement that you never really had, in the life you once lived.

At the same time, undergoing baptism is never a finished business, at least during this earthly life. There is never a point where we can say, "Ok, I have now done all I need to do" or "I now know all I need to know." There is always a death to our old selves that needs to happen in order to be restored to the life God promises us. And if we are paying

attention, God gives us opportunities each day to die to ourselves in order to be raised with him, through some act of self-giving love.

The Baton

Dear Charles, (Adeline, Lily, Conrad,)
here at church we have been talking a lot about the relay race of life and the baton that is passed from one generation to another. Someday I hope you will see your baptism, as one of the ways we are passing the baton to you.

Oddly enough, this ritual of drowning is a most precious baton, that contains a mystery that unlocks what we believe is the most amazing and wonderful life that a person can live. It tells us that hidden in the pain and suffering of this world, there is a world of profound beauty and grace and safety, to which you already belong. But to unleash the power in this baton, you will have to follow through and live your baptism with faith that, when God's love calls you to die to yourself in the service of others, you are actually being called into that greater life. May your life be full of wonder and joy and blessing, with love...

The people of Montague Congregational Church,

November twelfth in the year of our Lord, 2023

Grapes on the Vine

Passing the Baton

Dear Charles, Dear Adeline, Dear Lily, Dear Conrad, Dear others.... We have the baton. As terribly imperfect as we are. As stuck in the past as we are. As difficult or bossy as we can sometimes be. We have been touched by the greatest gift a person can have; a gift that can't be taken away from us and that we want to share with you. The gift of God's love. And even though we sometimes have trouble living up to it, we know that it is the greatest gift a person can have. And we have it, and we want to pass it on to you, because we love you. We want you to know about Jesus and his love, because there are many ways to talk about love, some of which are just wrong. There is only one genuine kind of love and Jesus points to it. And we received this gift because other people gave it to us, because they loved us. Be patient with us. Someday you will cry and cry with a mix of great joy and sadness, enough to make your heart burst, when you realize what Jesus has offered us to carry in our hearts and pass on. You will know without question, that the path he shows is us the most important path we can take in this life.

And when you are full to bursting with the love of God, you will be like one of the plump and shining grapes that are God's harvest. O children, if you only could know now, how beautiful God's harvest of souls can be, you too would weep with gratitude, as someday you will, when you

too think of the accumulation of wisdom and kindness, strength and mercy that God's love stores up in his children, before he brings them home.