Remembering our Baptism
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22
January 10, 2010

For many, **America is seen as a "great melting pot."** I like to think of our country as a giant quilt. Each panel represents the lives of those who have gone before us and each day that we live our lives a panel is woven together by the individual threads that make up the story of who we are and how we have lived**. I like the quilt image much** better than a melting pot because a melting pot is hot; it has to be in order to melt the contents. The melting pot is only accessible to those who have the right gloves and equipment to approach it. In other words, it **separates "us" from "them."** It divides us into categories of those who have and those who have not. It forces us to look at ourselves as separate groups. A quilt, however, is something often sewn together in love. It invites us to touch it and wrap ourselves up in its warmth. The hands that construct a quilt often seek to tell a **story in the beauty that is created.** Many of the older quilts found in museums and in some of our homes are constructed of the clothing, draperies, table linens, and bed linens of loved ones long ago. They have been sewn together in **love as a reflection of the lives and people** who were precious to the one constructing the quilt. Among those precious memories usually what is also encapsulated are the cultural and ethnic identities of the family. What is precious about the quilt is its story, the love shown in the construction, the people whose lives are **reflected amongst the blocks of fabrics and the threads,** and the lives that continue the story each time someone uses the quilt for its warmth or even simply when admiring its beauty. There is no separation; each piece comes together to form one. Precious indeed.

Our text today from Isaiah tells us that we are "precious" and loved by God. (vs. 4) Isaiah also says our Creator knows each of us. We have been called by name and redeemed by

God through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The **Holy Spirit is present** at each moment of our lives including our baptism.

On this, Baptism of Jesus, Sunday we reflect upon Jesus' baptism and seek to remember our own. It was following his baptism in the Jordan River that we see Jesus' ministry become a more formal and intentional way of life for him. **"He was more intentional with his** public acts of healing, preaching, teaching, and reconciliation – acts which touched the lives of **all people. We, too, come to the font** of our local church and are baptized into the body of Christ…and so begins our ministry as we are welcomed into the priesthood of all believers. Our baptism is like a launching pad for our ministry**. It is a simple act: simple water, simple words** — and yet it is utterly transformative. All too often, though, this sacrament is seen as a rite of **passage or an obligation:** a token right that *we are supposed to do* for the newborn baby. Baptism, however, is far more than that — it is far more important. It is an individual and communal living out of our faith.

Our baptism signifies that [we are**] "joined with the universal church, the body of Christ.** In baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always."[1] Listen to the questions asked of us during **our baptismal covenant and joining:** "Do you promise by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and **word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?… Do you** promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful **member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating** Christ's presence and furthering Christ's

[1] Baptism: A Practice of Faith in the United Church of Christ. Pamphlet

mission in all the world**?"**[2] **In baptism we promise with the help of God to** fulfill the call upon our new lives. We are a new creation following our baptism. Paul writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"[3] **That is what we are called to remember this day.** At our baptism and in Christ the expectation is that as new creations we will celebrate Christ's presence and further Christ's mission in the world.

What was Christ's mission in the world? **It was to be about the work of God's kin-dom** building here on earth. Jesus renounced oppression, resisted evil, showed love, sought justice and was witness to the work of God in the world. Jesus advocated for the needs of the **poor and needy. He promoted equal rights for women** not just in words, but also in deed. He gave voice to those who were imprisoned. He was concerned for the widow and the orphaned. He was concerned for those who were ill. His ministry was an ongoing mission field to the world. Jesus saw not just the individual needs, **but also the communal needs. It is through the** grace of God that we must do the same. Baptism is not a free pass and does not guarantee us an easy life. It does not free us from the trials and temptations that will come. We know that from Jesus' experience. He was tempted, tested, and was crucified and he had been baptized. **Baptism offers us a visible sign of God's invisible grace**. It offers us the promise that God is always present in our lives through the gifts of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of each other.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you… when you walk through fire you shall not be burned…Do not fear, for I am with you…." (Isa. 43:2,5) **Again, our baptism offers** us the reassurance of God's presence in our lives and in our world. It also challenges us to live **into the promises we make as parents, sponsors, and as a family** of faith. As a congregation we promise to love, support, and care for the one being baptized as they live and grow in Christ.

[2] Book of Worship: United Church of Christ. p. 139

We are part of a new community. **This means two things for our understanding of what it** means to be the Church. (Tamilio III)

- **First of all, everyone is welcome into the church community** — not because it is the ethical thing to do; not because it is "politically correct." Everyone is welcome into the community, because everyone is our brother and sister. What is it that Robert Frost once said? **"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."** So it is with the church.
- **Secondly, a new sacramental understanding of baptism** and what it means to be the church gives us a new mandate for doing mission work. The mission field into to which we are called to labor is indeed ***all around us*****. It excludes no one.** ***What a concept!*** The people that we are called to reach out to and to offer the love of Jesus Christ to are everywhere: they live within our community and they live overseas; they **are our neighbors and they are foreigners;** they speak our language and they speak in strange tongues; they look like us and they look radically different from us. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is **no longer slave or free, there is no longer male** and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." From out of these waters, a new community emerges. [3]

This places a challenge before us as a congregation. We need to rethink how we think about ourselves as a congregation. Is our identity as a church first and foremost as [Peace **United Church of Christ in Stevens Point] and, therefore, focused inward**…or do we see ourselves as part of the larger body of Christ and, therefore, is our focus outward? If the answer is inward, then our ministry is not only shortsighted, but it is an utter contradiction of

[3] Rv. John Tamilio III. (The Colonial Church in Prairie Village, UCC) Sermon: "The New Community" (Luke 17:11-19) January 13, 2008

our baptismal identity. **Being a baptized Christian means that we are not only part of a local** church, but that we are also part of a new community that extends far beyond our walls and we need to behave accordingly.[4] The mission field is great. Within our baptismal covenant we say to God that we will be responsible for one another and to all of creation.

This is our father's and mother's world. We find ourselves, as a part of our baptismal covenant, stitched and woven together like a quilt. Each patch and each thread coming together to celebrate **Christ's presence in our lives and each working together** to further Christ's mission on earth. We become a part of the universal church pledging to love, support, and care for one another and all of God's creation. There is only "us" as sisters and **brothers in God's family. We are** to let our light shine remembering it is God who knows us by name and it is God who calls us "precious**." In the remembering our baptism let us also** remember that our Christian work is not done until every human being and every living creature, **all of God's creation, knows they too are precious in God's sight.**[5]

[4] Ibid
[5] Gary W. Charles. Good Preacher.com