

**5 Epiphany  
February 9, 2014**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

About a year and a half ago a young woman visited St. Cyprian's for the first time. If you look around at the people with whom you are sharing the pews you will see why it was so obvious that I was aware that a YOUNG woman visited us. A couple of weeks later she returned and as she was leaving I asked if she was new to the area. She replied that she and her husband were staying on their sailboat in one of the marinas just south of here while it was in dry dock being repaired. A month or so later John Miller led a bicycle tour of Lincolnville for people of St. Cyprian's and others and this young woman and her husband joined us. By now it was obvious that she was pregnant.

About a mile and a half into the tour John Miller stopped to tell us about one of the houses and while we were standing there in the sun the young woman felt lightheaded, and her husband helped her to sit down on the side of the road. Everyone was concerned but the couple insisted we did not need to call 9-1-1. But my house was just a block away, so I got my van, loaded up the woman and her husband and their bicycles, and took them over to the marina. That was the last I saw of them ... until Easter last year.

I thought for sure that we would never see them again. But on Easter morning Katy and Jon Hughes, along with their baby Finn, showed up at church. This was no easy feat since they were staying on their sailboat, now anchored in the mooring field, and had to row ashore and ride their bikes ... with baby Finn carried by Katy in a sling, just to get to church. Well, Katy, Jon, and baby Finn ... and the wonderful music he sings in the back of the church ... have been with us on a regular basis ever since. And yesterday was Finn's first birthday. And today is the occasion of his baptism.

What a true and deep honor it is to be performing this baptism this morning. It is a gift to the entire congregation, and it is a joy to have Katy and Jon's family here for this celebration. But exactly what are we doing this morning? What does baptism mean in the church today in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And what does it mean for everyone in Finn's life ... parents, godparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, even the congregation that surrounds him?

Let me first say what baptism isn't ... at least not for me. It is not magic. It is not some ritual that gives Finn some special credential that allows him into heaven. It isn't a ticket to God's love that can only be dispensed by the Church. It isn't a membership card that means ... when he is ready ... that he can come to the holy table for bread and wine. In spite of what the

Church has taught for over 2,000 years, this understanding of Baptism is more about the Church than it is about the loving presence of God.

If Baptism is not all that, then what is it? The Church teaches that Holy Baptism is a “sacrament” which means that it is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” What we are doing here today ... this Baptism, and for that matter, this Holy Eucharist ... is the “outward and visible sign.” However, it is but a tiny window into that “spiritual grace” that is already present. You see, the Christian Church, for almost 2,000 years, has taught that God’s love is reserved only for those who have received this sacrament. Yet, the Church also proclaims that this creation ... all of it, and every human being in that creation ... is a loving gift from God. We ... as the Church ... proclaim that the divine presence of God is everywhere and in everyone. That is the “spiritual grace” that we talk about. The fact is that Finn, and all of us, are beloved children of God.

Then why have a baptism at all? If this is just the “outward and visible sign” of a reality that already exists, why bother? The answer for me is that in this “outward and visible sign” we ... the whole Church ... become a voice for God in the world today. The promises that are made by Katy and Jon, and by Finn’s godparents on behalf of Finn ... and for that matter by all of us as the community of faith surrounding Finn ... those promises are that we will act in the ways that shows God’s love to ALL of God’s creation and every human being in it.

In the Baptismal Covenant we will be asked:

*Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?*

*[And] Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?*

“The Good News of God in Christ.” Just what is that Good News? That “Good News” is that the loving presence of the divine permeates everything in God’s creation ... and everyone in God’s creation. If that is the case how could we not see the loving presence of the divine in ALL other humans, even when our neighbor looks different from us and may live on the other side of the world?

Two thousand years ago, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus laid out his vision of God’s Kingdom ... this Good News. The text says he was preaching to a “crowd.” In Greek this word has a slightly different meaning than just a group of people. The “crowd” were those on the edge of society, the disenfranchised, the “no-bodies.” Yet Jesus affirmed each and every person in the crowd and he told them that they had within them more than enough to be whole. “You are the salt of the earth,” he told them. He was telling them that without them life would lose its flavor. You are whole people and a valuable ingredient in the soup of life.

“You are the light of the world,” he told these folks. You are whole people who fill the world around you with illumination. So don’t hide your life under a basket ... use your light to let people see in a new way, and fill the whole house with the love of the divine presence of God.

We are the salt and light of the world. We give voice in “word and example” to the loving presence of God. What we do in this church on Sunday feeds the spirit in each of us so that we might go into a world and be the people God made us to be ... whole people ... people who add flavor to the world ... people who bring a new way of seeing with a whole different level of brightness ... people who give voice to the loving presence of God in the world. When we baptize Finn we are promising that we will give him a family and community that loves him so much that he, too, will know that “inward and spiritual grace” as a reality in his life, and that he will grow to give voice to the loving presence of God in all the people in his life and beyond.

But this “Good News” of God’s loving presence is not just some empty ideal. This “Good News” requires deep conviction and commitment. In our reading from the Prophet Isaiah this morning we heard these words:

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

The question these words are raising is how the experience of defeat, exile, and return has shaped the faith of those who are now living in Jerusalem. Are the pious practices of the Temple ... the “outward and visible signs” ... sufficient? Or had piety been redefined by the experience of the Israelites ... that experience of defeat by the Assyrians, exile to Babylon, and finally their return to their homeland?

And we hear the echo of those words from Isaiah in the Baptismal Covenant:

*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

In Isaiah’s time the outward and visible sign was fasting with one’s head lowered and wearing sack cloth dirtied with ashes. But Isaiah is saying that the lowered head and sack cloth and ashes means nothing unless it is accompanied by breaking the bonds of injustice, of freeing the prisoner, of feeding the hungry and giving shelter to the homeless poor and clothing the naked.

Twenty-five hundred years ago Isaiah lived in a world full in injustice and oppression, of stark contrast between the poor and the wealthy, the powerful and the disenfranchised. Isaiah railed against those who were wealthy enough to even have food to give up for a fast. He deplored the empty piety of the elite who lived in relative luxury and who wielded power over the crowds of poor people.

But is that world then so much different from the world in which Finn will grow up? Our promises in this Baptism ... the “outward and visible sign” ... is that we will model for Finn how to be God’s voice in the world for those without a voice. That the path to a life well-lived is by showing the love of God for all of God’s creation and for everyone who lives in it ... regardless of

where they live, or the language they may speak, or the name by which they may call the loving divine presences.

Most of all Finn's Baptism today is a reminder to all of us that we are beloved children of God. That this creation is permeated with a loving divine presence ... it is in everyone and everything. When we have that worldview we approach the stranger with curiosity, not fear. We strive to respect others ... and God's creation ... not exploit them. We can affirm ourselves as being drenched in the love of God's divine presence ... we can see others drenched in the love of the divine presence ... and we can share that love with all those who ... for whatever reason ... have difficulty knowing that as a reality in their lives.

Today we baptize Finn as the "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." That grace is the loving presence of the divine in all of creation ... and in all of you. Remember, you are a beloved child of God. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You give voice to the loving presence of God when you respect the dignity of EVERY human being. You give voice to the loving presence of God in every human being when you strive for justice where there is injustice; when you bring freedom to those who are oppressed by the powerful; when you bring peace to the world around you. Remember, you are a beloved child of a loving God. Now let's teach Finn that he is one too.

Amen.