

**“Affirmed by love”**

**January, 10 - 2010**

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Gods' peace with u!

Let us read together the sermon text of Luke, the verses, which are printed in our worship folder and which are taken from chapter 3. We don't need the read the headline “The baptism of Jesus”, which u c in the middle of the text before verse 21.

*15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,*

*16 John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

*17 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

*21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened,*

*22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Amen.

Please take a moment and pick for yourself a word, a phrase or sentence, which u think could be for the key of this text piece. I will not ask for it.

...

Thank you!

Marka showed us in the Children's Message how baptism gets us out of a singular life into the community of faith and that in this faith community our different gifts are called to work together. TOGETHER. Not against each other. This might be already a difference to the economic system we live in. There I have the feeling that it is more the competition and the fight one against another, which is expected from me. Baptism however values the gifts we bring into the community. In this case: The community of faith. Baptism sees the advantage of corporation, calls to look at the gifts we bring with us and which we are called to share. This is unlike the market where we search for the weakness or failing of others, where we only recognize the neighbor as competitor. It seems that the idea of man in Christianity is somehow more relationship focused than in our economic system. Do you remember Paul's picture of the body and the many gifts? Paul uses his famous picture in his epistle to the Ephesians in chapter 4. Please notice how also for Paul baptism transforms life by getting baptism in one context with spirit, unity, faith and love. It reads: *"I therefore beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism,*

According to Luke Jesus was around 29 years old, when he got baptized. Any idea how we know that? Let's do a little bible quiz. Please take one of the bibles, u c in front of u in the pew. Please go to the beginning of chapter 3 – what do u read? ... Exactly: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius". Tiberius started his reign in the year 14. 14 plus 15 is the year 29. And when u go to verse 23 of the same chapter 3 u can read that Jesus was 30years when he started his public ministry. Even we can not be sure, if Jesus was not born up to 7 years earlier – Jesus got baptized as adult. And this is witnessed by all four gospels.

Jesus public teaching didn't last long, only around one year. Yes, it didn't take long for the Roman and Jewish rulers to neutralize him.

Please allow me now to focus on something we probably all don't like very much. I haven't met in my life many progressive Christians who like the passages in the First or Second Testament, which talk about judgments, especially the Last Judgment. It is more like especially in this congregation: everybody wants harmony all over; God is love and certainly – everybody is invited to this big and radical open table. Am I allowed to point out the verses 16 and 17?

\16 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

17 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Doesn't this sound like a threat? In verse 7 John the Baptist has affronted already the crowd, which came to get baptized with this famous word, we had a couple of weeks ago as reading: "You brood of vipers!" So first a bashing, now a threat; I am not sure who we want to attract with this kind of anti-advertisement for baptism. How do we deal with it?

You remember the threshing-floor picture I handed out, when we talked about Ruth and Boaz, the story with the uncovering of the feet? Luke uses this picture from the Hebrew bible as his listeners still live in an agricultural-nomadic society and know this picture from their daily lives.

Are you wheat or are you chaff? Will u end up in the granary or will u burn with unquenchable fire? Can baptism guarantee u the granary?

John the Baptist baptized as we do – with water. We all know what this means. We clean ourselves day for day with water. Water means cleaning, without water no life. The water baptism symbolizes cleaning. ...cleaning from sin, from selfish acting, neglecting the relationships of the human race on the whole planet. The

Matthew version of Jesus baptism is clearer than the Luke one. In the gospel of Matthew John the Baptist says: 'I baptize you with water for repentance'.

"Repent!" – This is the call we hear in baptism. "Repent" to God, to a respectful live with all creation, to peace among all human mankind – a just peace, a fair peace. Here and worldwide. Back are we to the great vision of Isaiah, the peaceful and eternal gathering of all nations around the Zion.

What happens to the ones, who don't repent? Will they burn in fire? I don't know. It is not on me to threaten. I cannot argue John's words about the fire away. I also will not defend them. I try to do what seems to be right.

But I know that we will have on May 23 six young Christians here, confirming their faith and saying "yes" to repentance. Our six young Christians will do, what we did at our own confirmation and what we do as faith community Sunday for Sunday: to promise to seek the Spirit, who calls for justice and peace in this so inchoate world. May 23<sup>rd</sup> is Pentecost. The symbol of Pentecost is ... -fire! But here the fire has cleaning character. It is the fire u need to heat the stones for a sweat lodge. The Indians did also know about the cleaning character of water and fire. The elements water and fire can kill or can heal. Like so often it depends on the quantity and way of use.

In baptism or confirmation we answer God's yes to us with OUR yes. It is amazing that our first reading today, the one Nan read from Isaiah had the sentence, which I would have quoted in any case today in conjunction with baptism: "I have called you by name, you are mine."

And this brings me to my last thought for today.

"I have called you by name, you are mine." What ever happens: You belong to God. You are free to turn away. You don't need to accept God's yes to u. U can call yourself atheist, u can keep some skeptical distance and call yourself

agnostic. What ever u do – u r free. But u will not change God's yes to u. No matter how much your dignity gets hurt, libeled or spurned by other people – God remains as last resort, affirming u in your human dignity.

But since Adam's and Eve's fall we are not anymore in paradise. We have to work to come back to God. God doesn't come down in a cloud, acting in our physical world. God uses usually people as angels, people, driven by the right spirit. Often we might be not aware about it. God's yes to us wants to be responded with our yes to our human fellows. The "I have called you by name, you are mine." gets answered by Christians with: "As I am yours and as u say this to all human beings, each single person on earth becomes my sister, my brother. I will be the keeper of my sister and my brother." In Genesis, chapter 4 Cain asks God: "Am I my brothers keeper?" "Yes" would have been the right answer, but he just has murdered his brother Abel. WE ARE EACH OTHERS KEEPERS.

This is the reason why we Christians have a mission -because we are each others keepers. Some people don't have the voice; don't have the ability to speak up. And some people cannot defend themselves. They become victims of the Cains of this world. This is the reason, why we in the UCC have a statement of mission, with which we affirm our faith.

This is where the circle closes. We have to speak out. We are not allowed to open our table for the Cain's of this world as long as they don't show repentance. Everything else would be ridicule of the victims. The pimp, who bashes his girl is not allowed to come into this sanctuary and to threaten her, while she is with us around the table. These walls of this Sanctuary turn into an impregnable castle to protect the weak.

It was the former commander of a submarine, Martin Niemoeller, who became first protestant minister and then after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war president of my former church around Frankfurt in Germany. He, the member of the confessing church,

is the author of the famous lines, which still remind us, that we betray God and our faith, when we don't take clear the side of the weak and protect them against the exploiter of this world. Here his words:

*First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;*

*Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out.*

In baptism and confirmation we answer Gods unconditional yes and love to us. In baptism and confirmation we commit ourselves to protect the weak, to suffer with the poor, to feel with the disfranchised the cross Jesus took first on his shoulders.

Yes, Our Mighty Fortress is Our God!

Amen

U all have the UCC Statement of Mission in your worship folders. Who ever is able and willing to affirm with this Statement our firm please may rise and speak loud with me together: ...