

My Child, with Whom I Am Well Pleased
For the Baptism of Simon Thompson Semper

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Matthew 3:13-17
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The first child born into Sojourners Community was eleven years old when he was baptized. Not because we had arrived at the conclusion that this was the ideal age, but because that's how long it took us to decide what we believed about baptism. Most of us Sojourners adults—very young at the time, in the late 1970s—would have said that we had forsaken the church traditions in which we had been raised to embrace this new experiment in community and radical discipleship in inner-city Washington, DC. But when it came to baptism, we learned otherwise.

At one point in a meeting during a particularly heated discussion, one of our Mennonite members declared to one of our Catholic members, "Now I understand why your ancestors killed mine over this!" It was offered as a joke, but it spoke to the very real strength of feelings, and to the tragic truth that church history is strewn with martyrs because of the inability of believers to respect one another's traditions. Nowhere does that seem more true than around the question of baptism.

So, I want us to pause for just a moment and recognize that what we are about to do as a congregation to little Simon over there may be one of the most radical acts we'll ever engage in. Because tonight, Christians across the spectrum of belief will celebrate the baptism of Simon Thompson Semper, our first at Circle of Mercy.

As Ken Sehested expressed so eloquently in the document he wrote in the early days of this Circle: "Our congregation seeks to pioneer a new path in the practice of baptism. Our founding represents the merging of two ancient baptismal traditions within the Christian community—of what are commonly called the traditions of 'infant baptism' and 'believer's baptism.'"

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Circle of Mercy is dually aligned with the United Church of Christ and the Alliance of Baptists. The UCC recognizes two sacraments, Holy Communion and baptism, with baptism of both infants and adults as part of its tradition. The Alliance acknowledges baptism as an ordinance of the church and practices believers' baptism, viewing baptism as a choice to be made at the age of maturity. We are further enriched in this Circle by members claiming faith traditions ranging from Roman Catholics, who embrace seven sacraments, to Mennonites from the Anabaptist tradition, to Quakers who have no practice of baptism—as well as virtually everything in between, and for some, no tradition at all.

Almost all church traditions have a two-stage process, the first of which affirms a child's blessedness in God and place in the community of faith—signified in some traditions by infant baptism and others by dedication. And then a second ritual comes at the "age of accountability"—signified as either confirmation or believers' baptism. We affirm both of these paths of discipleship.

Again, Ken's words: "In the first act, the community embraces the child; in the second, the child—upon maturity—embraces the community... The important thing is that we communicate the holistic vision of the paradox that we are both chosen by God and that we choose God." I think the words of the UCC formula, which I've always loved, are appropriate here: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity."

Our celebration of a Circle baptism feels similar to our sharing of the bread and cup each Sunday. Our various traditions view it as Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, Agape Meal, Lord's Supper. Whatever we

call it—and whether or not we hail from a tradition labeled “sacramental”—we all know that this ritual is a “sacrament” in the deepest sense—a consecrated, holy, sacred moment. One of the great gifts and joys to me of Circle of Mercy is that we can approach the table each Sunday from the diversity of our traditions and come together in the holiness of the moment. And I look forward to our also doing so tonight in celebration of Simon.

A brief word about the history of baptism. The ritual has Jewish roots, which we know from our scriptures. In the verses leading up to tonight’s passage, we read in Matthew 3:5—“Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to [John the Baptist], and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

The message of John was “repent”: turn from your sins and failings, steer your life in a new direction. Then, as now, baptism was viewed as a disruption, a death and resurrection, a shifting of loyalties from the ways of the world to the ways of God. It included letting go of the old and embracing God’s grace and mercy.

One of the early baptismal formulas of the church was Galatians 3:28—“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.”

Baptism is initiation into a community of equals under the mercy of Christ, who invites us all to reconciliation. Ironically, the place where Jesus himself was baptized is now unreachable. When I was in the Holy Land a few years ago with a group of seminarians, our guide took us to see the Jordan River. But he explained that the area of Jesus’ baptism is part of the “no man’s land,” as he described it, between enemy territories caught up in the Middle East wars.

Two thousand years later, we still need that message of repentance and reconciliation. Tonight we participate together in a ritual acknowledging the power of both.

I invite us into it with the wise words of two sages. The first is Mark Twain. In an era when discussion in churches about the “right” way to baptize was heated, someone asked the great humorist, “Do you believe in infant baptism?” Mark Twain responded, “Believe in it? Hell, I’ve seen it!” After tonight, we can all say the same.

The second is Archbishop Oscar Romero, martyr of El Salvador. In all the attention given to his spiritual and political courage, we often neglect the fact that Romero was a marvelous pastor. I thank Missy Harris for passing these words of his along to me on this occasion. Romero said that the purpose of families is “to promote the changes needed...in society [and] in the ways of justice.” He declared this will be easy “once boys and girls are trained in the heart of each family to aspire not to have more but to be more, not to grab everything but to give abundantly to others. They must be educated for love. Loving is what the family is all about, and loving means giving oneself, surrendering oneself to the well-being of all and working for the common happiness.”

In that spirit, we turn our attention to Simon, Mary Anne, and Chris. They have requested that we begin by offering thanks for the precious gift of life given by Simon’s birthmother, Brandy Thompson. On our altar you’ll see a picture of Brandy with her daughter, Skylar, and her mother, Teresa. On this night of celebration, we acknowledge that the deepest joy of some touches the rawest pain of others. And so tonight we embrace Brandy with our prayers and our gratitude and our trust that she will find her way back to joy as well.

The other picture on our altar is of Mary Anne’s Nana, a devout Catholic and collector of angels who has been a spiritual guide and emotional anchor in Mary Anne’s life. Nana is shown with Mary Anne’s young niece Aliyah when she was learning to walk. This is the image Mary Anne has of her Nana—walking behind, holding up, offering encouragement and support—a guardian angel. A friend gave Mary Anne the statue before us of an angel in the same pose with a young boy, as a reminder that Nana now has another life to watch over.

Nana always knew that this job would come to her. She never doubted. She crocheted the beautiful baby blanket on our altar in anticipation, harboring the promise of the child that would one day join Mary Anne and Chris, helping them to cling to that promise as well.

Both Chris and Mary Anne were baptized as Catholic infants. And before Nana died at the age of 96, Mary Anne made a promise to her to have that anticipated child baptized as an infant as well. The bowl and cup we'll use to baptize Simon are treasures that first belonged to Nana.

The Celtic stream of Catholicism embraces the concept of original blessing, rather than the traditional notion of original sin. Mary Anne has embraced her Irish roots through this stream. So she and Chris view baptizing Simon not as a matter of urgency but as a matter of desire, and an affirmation of God's grace in Simon's life and his place in our Circle.

The colorful quilt that our children sat on during the Children's Time was lovingly stitched by Jo Hauser, a reminder of the Circle's embrace of this new family. We also welcome Simon with the bottles of formula and gift cards that have been brought. And with the gift of the other angel on our altar, crocheted by Wiley Dobbs, our friend on death row in Georgia. Wiley is someone who has known the constant presence and mercy of God, and his angel is here as a sign of that promise for Simon, and in honor of all those who are part of Simon's extended family who are no longer physically present but are among the angels watching over him.

Chris and Mary Anne found the nest that is on the altar as they were preparing their yard for their wedding. It held their rings during their marriage ceremony. And now it holds a beautiful egg, a gift from Chris' stepfather and a sign that the nest that was empty for so long has now been filled.

Someday, Simon, your parents will tell you how long they waited, how deeply they longed, how fervently they prayed—for exactly you. Someday they will tell you about Brandy, whose last name is your middle name, who loved you enough to choose the best possible parents. Someday they will tell you about tonight, and about the great throng of angels who are celebrating you.

Mary Anne says that she and Chris picked the name Simon because they thought it was "a wise, sweet name." So let us all be thankful, because this is a couple with a dog named Goober—which Chris has explained is actually Latin for "governor." I'm guessing that Mary Anne vetoed his suggestions for their son: Abundio, Academicus, and Aesculapius. (You can tell I only got as far as "A" on the internet with Latin names).

Simon, we thank you for giving us this opportunity to celebrate your life, to baptize and dedicate you to God, and to welcome you into our family of faith. Tonight, the heavens part for you as they did for Jesus. Tonight, the Spirit of God descends like a dove. Tonight, a voice says, with tender pride: "This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Amen.