Baptism Reflection  
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My son William seems to be entering a very concrete time in development—moving from the toddlers world in which real and imaginary are all one in the same and an adolescent world that can clearly distinguish and enjoy the two. In between is a drive to have questions answered. And when one is answered another one comes. There isn’t much of an appreciation for mystery yet. He wants to know how things work. How does a car move down the street? How does our food move through our bodies? Why doesn’t a fountain dry up? Is a rhinoceros a mammal? And that was just this week!

And as we grow older, we begin to understand that there aren’t always answers, we start to appreciate mystery. But still some questions linger. Sometimes we really wish we could know, what is God doing? What is truth? What happens after we die? Why is there suffering?

In church we wrestle in between the vast mystery of it all and giving something concrete to hold on to. We are all here because we want to feel something, we want to know something. If we wanted only questions, we could probably get that on our own. But we come here to experience the concrete and the mysterious together.

In the UCC, we have two particular rituals that bring the concrete and the mysterious together. We call them sacraments. Sacrament means a sign of grace. In the Roman Catholic traditions, they believe the sacraments actually are grace. God literally does something in the ritual to give you salvation. In the UCC and most other protestant traditions, we believe that God freely gives the grace to everybody whether or not you practice the sacraments.

But the sacraments are a sign of the mystery. They are how we bring together God’s mystery and our own concreteness. God’s grace may be a mystery. But this water is concrete. This bread is concrete.

And something special happens when we spiritually go through a sacramental ritual. The ritual can’t capture everything about God’s mystery, but it is an entry point, a place for us to connect. The sacrament is a sign of all the extravagant love that God has to offer.

We affirm two sacraments, baptism and holy communion. We do these two rituals because Jesus did them himself and told his disciples to continue them. They have been continued by Christians since his death and so we have a special connection with all those who have affirmed the mystery of God’s love even as they perform the same rituals with every day things like water and bread.
The UCC website says this “All our emphases seem to come together in the sacraments. Christ claims us, and we belong to Christ. God offers an extravagant welcome, and we share in it. God keeps covenant with us, and we unite as one with Christians throughout the world. God offers a vision of justice and love, and we are inspired to live it. Together, through water, bread, and wine, we know the still-speaking God.”

http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-one-at-baptism-and-at.html

The first sacrament, blending the spiritual and the worldly together, is baptism. So what is baptism? Baptism is one of the ways we acknowledge the light and love God has for each individual person. At some baptisms, churches will have a candle lit from the Christ candle as well to symbolize that light coming from God to each of us.

But if God loves us each individually, then we share a bond, an identity together as children of God. And baptism also acknowledges that connection, that unity.

Over time, we have wanted to acknowledge that unity more when we practice baptism. As we recognize one another in community, we also recognize our covenant with one another. I’m a child of God and you are a beloved child of God and as such we are linked together and we commit in baptism to live out the connection.

Because baptism acknowledges outwardly what we believe God does inwardly; because its symbol is water; and because Jesus’ baptism was the start of his formal ministry, baptism has also come to represent a fresh start, a way to acknowledge a big change or a new life path.

But what makes baptism special is different for each of us. So I’d like to open up the floor for stories about your own baptism or a baptism you witnessed. What made it memorable? What made it special?

The congregation then shared stories of their own baptisms, baptisms they have seen, a church that burned down but the baptismal font survived, and misunderstandings about baptism that they had as children.

We closed with a prayer and celebrated a reaffirmation of Anthony Brinckhaus’ baptism.

Here is the liturgy for Anthony’s baptism affirmation:

A sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace. The sacrament of baptism is both God’s gift and our response to that gift. We believe that baptism places each of us into the body of Christ, the church, which is the universal church of believers in Christ, and that sacrament is big enough, strong enough, and cleansing enough to last forever. Even so, sometimes it is important to affirm that baptism again. To make a fresh start and release
the things of the past.

God’s love for us has no beginning and no ending. Parents overflowing with love for their children, act on their faith in bringing their precious little ones to be baptized. They acknowledge that to raise children in faith takes a whole community, like this one. People in the congregation will be teachers, mentors, surrogate grandparents, and role models in a young person’s faith journey. When children reach an age of discernment, we as a congregation will offer preparation and an opportunity for them to make their own commitment of faith, to confirm, or make firm, what baptism has already begun. The journey of faith is life long, and baptism is a sacred milestone in it.

Kellie and Teneshia, if you are ready to continue this journey, please come forward with Anthony and anyone else from your family who is here to support you today (sometimes aunts/uncles/grandparents/godparents like to come forward).

*Kellie shares what this day means to her and their family.*

Litany of Baptism

One: We are gathered to present Anthony to the church and to dedicate him to God. What can we affirm about him?

Many: That he is a child of God and made in the image of God.

One: As Anthony grows in our congregation, how will he know that he is a child of God, made in God’s image?

Many: We will give him our love and include him in the life and ministry of this congregation.

One: How will he learn of the Christian faith?

Many: We will tell him about Abraham, the father of our faith; about Sarah, the mother of Isaac; about Moses and Miriam who led our ancestors out of bondage; about Ruth’s example of faithfulness; about Mary and Joseph’s openness to mystery; about the Savior, Jesus; and about the history of the church as the people of God.

One: And what, in turn, will we expect of him?

Many: We look forward to sitting with him at Christ’s Table, sharing with him the costs and joys of discipleship, learning and growing with him in the Christian pilgrimage, and declaring with one voice our faith in God and God’s son, Jesus.
Statement of Commitment

Anthony, do you love God? Do you believe God loves you? Will you continue seeking God in your life here at church and everywhere else you go?

Kellie and Teneshia, Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ’s disciples, to assume the primary responsibility of helping Anthony grow in the Christian faith, to help him resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, to be a faithful member of the church through active participation, and to celebrate the presence of the God in all of life? If so, please respond: Yes, we promise, with the help of God.

Congregational Commitment

Pastor: Do you, who witness and celebrate this affirmation of the sacrament, promise your love, support, and care to the Anthony, as he lives and grows in Christ?

Congregation: We promise our love, support and care. We as the body of Christ are ready and eager to surround Anthony with our love and care.

Prayer over the water

One: Let us pray. We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the parting of the sea you led your people from slavery into freedom. In the wilderness, your provided for their needs with water from a rock. In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus who was nurtured in the water of Mary’s womb. At the river, your Child was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus’ death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you. God you continue to faithfully nourish us and the world around us with rain, river, and ocean. As a tree sends down its roots for water, reach out for us and offer us again the transformation and sustenance of Your Spirit. Amen.

Blessing of Anthony

Anthony, when Jesus was baptized, the spirit of God was there, saying “You are my child, my beloved, in your I am well pleased. At this very moment, and at every moment in time, God’s spirit, God’s breath, is with you, for you too are a precious child of God who is loved and blessed. Anthony Brickhaus, you are blessed and your baptism affirmed in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.

Anthony, welcome to your new family in Christ!
On behalf of the whole congregation and global community of Christians, I welcome you again to new life in Christ. May we all remember that God’s love shines forth through Anthony and all of us, at all times and in all places.

Congregational Prayer

We rejoice in God’s empowering love, freely given to each and all. We welcome you Anthony, into the circle of love in Christ’s church. We promise to pray for you, to seek the depths of faith with you, to support you, and to love you. We covenant with you to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. May God help us on that journey. Amen.