

A Sermon by N. Sellers, preached at First Congregational Church, Branford CT on 4-17-16

## "Welcome!"

Acts 8:26-40

There are two sacraments recognized and celebrated in the United Church of Christ: One is baptism and the other is the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion which we celebrate monthly as well as during special services of the Christian calendar year. This morning, we've had the chance to celebrate with Roman and his family, the joyful experience of baptism! Baptism is an outward and visible sign of God's grace at work in the life of an individual; it is through this symbolic action we are joined into the church universal, the body of Christ. With cleansing water, we are forgiven, renewed and called forth as people with a mission to love and serve God in this world. For infants and children as well as other folks who have never been taken this step, baptism "marks their acceptance into the care of Christ's church, the sign and seal of God's grace and forgiveness, and the beginning of their Christian faith and life."<sup>1</sup> We know from Scripture that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, who himself had responded to God's call to proclaim a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" to the Jewish people along the Jordan River. (Luke 3:3ff)

Throughout the story of the early church in the New Testament book of Acts, the spread of the "Jesus movement" out into the ancient Roman world, includes many examples of the way the Spirit ignited the growth of new believers, calling them to a new life and baptism in Jesus' name. Sometimes it was small gatherings of Gentiles, as in the story of the Roman centurion who along with his relatives and close friends was baptized after hearing Peter preach in the military man's home about Jesus. (Acts 10:34ff). Other times the story is told of whole households, parents and children and extended family whose encounter with God through the disciples' ministry, leads to baptism and great joy! Such was the decision of the Philippian jailer for Paul and Silas in the account found in chapter 16. (16:16-34) And sometimes, a single grown-up chooses to receive baptism in response to learning about Jesus.

Today's lesson from the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, is about a Spirit-guided encounter between Philip, who succeeded Stephan as a preacher and prophet helping to spread the Good News to the non-Jewish world, and an Ethiopian pilgrim, one who was literally on the road back to his home after worshipping in Jerusalem at the temple. Guided by one of God's angel messengers, Philip is sent to a wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza where he meets up with this traveler in a chariot. That this man is **one**) from Ethiopia, a foreigner and stranger, and **two**) a eunuch meaning a man who was ceremonially castrated in order to be of royal service to the Candace, the queen of his country, serves to underscore, that in terms of **three**) his geographical location in non-man's land on a dangerous road outside the city walls – there's something very, very unusual going on: Even though he's from a different heritage and ethnic group, and he's not fit to be a good Jew according to the Torah because of the modification of his body, he too has a come-to-Jesus moment, right there in his moving chariot with Philip as they study Isaiah. And that moment of understanding and conversion leads to a request for baptism!

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.uss.org/worship\\_baptism](http://www.uss.org/worship_baptism)

Suddenly, without much warning, Philip becomes a part of extending God's extravagant welcome: Whereas baptism offered by Jesus and the disciples was shared with Jewish converts as they responded to Jesus' teachings, now there are others, outsiders to Jewish culture and traditions who are being welcomed into the Church. This is a new day for the Jesus movement, one where the emphasis is on the way believers come together both geographically and in the oneness of heart and mind, never mind all the things that used to keep people apart. The edges of God's tent expand again and again; we are all of us welcomed, celebrated, embraced, and included.<sup>2</sup> This is a welcome you and I and the rest of the church are called to extend again and again, in Jesus' name. While some would prefer to place various tests of intention or commitment before those to be baptized, as if vetting a membership in some exclusive organization, this act of welcome with water is about the presence of God at work in the life of the church, and a symbol of God's action in our world. "It reminds us who we are and who God is calling us to be," writes Professor Elizabeth Francis Caldwell, "[we are] God's children. The waters of baptism mark us for a life of faithful service and witness in God's name."<sup>3</sup>

As a congregation we now have a sacred promise which we share together with Roman and his parents and family: we have an opportunity and the responsibility to be partners in nurturing this child's faith journey. And as we are at the very beginning of this journey to learn more about God, let's ask ourselves how we plan to go about this? How can our worshipping life and the experiences we shape for the formation of our youngest and newest members, be as vibrant and meaningful as any other aspect of our life together? What needs to change in an age when two and three year olds are computer and technology literate? I recently learned from a colleague, that his two year old grand-daughter was able to "borrow" his iPhone and use Face Time to contact her mother all by herself! What does this say to us as the church, as we promise to support Roman's spiritual development; in what ways are we able to connect with and speak the language of the youngest learners in our midst? When Roman reaches the age of confirmation, what will he be able to affirm, based on his experiences here at this church as well as other the church settings he will be a part of closer to his geographical home? Can we be a spiritual home for the digital age – are we willing to figure out how to connect and communicate in a 24/7 age of screen-based media?

The lyrics of theologian, poet and hymn writer Brian Wren might sharpen our focus:

In water we grow, secure in the womb,  
and speechlessly know love's safety and room.

Baptizing and blessing we publish for good  
the freeing, caressing safe keeping of God.

In water we wash: the dirt of each day,  
its trouble and rush are carried away.

In Christ re-created by love's cleansing art,  
self-will and self-hatred dissolve and depart.

In water we dive, and cannot draw breath,  
then surface alive, rebounding from death.

Our old self goes under, in Christ dead and drowned.

We rise, washed in wonder, by love clad and crowned.

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Martin *Worship in the Early Church* Eerdmans, 1992:134-135.

<sup>3</sup> *Come Unto Me* Pilgrim Press, 1996:18.

In water we dwell, for by its deep flow  
through bloodstream and cell, we live, think, and grow  
Praise God, love outflowing, whose well of new birth  
baptizes our knowing, and waters the earth.<sup>4</sup>

From our beginnings in 1644 as a church settled in a town called Totokett, meaning “place of the tidal river” which was originally purchased from the Native American leader Montowese, we have been about adapting and changing with new challenges: For example, it took many decades for the members of this church to agree to purchase a stove for the purposes of heating the meeting house; the first vote resulted seeking to install a stove was defeated – imagine, no heat!? And our first church building was a log cabin with a thatched roof and a dirt floor. There’ve been a LOT of changes, and I imagine God is still calling us to reinvent what church is about today and tomorrow, trusting God will again make a way for the church. (<http://www.firstcongregationalbranford.org/history.html>)

Olivia and Steven, our congregation rejoices with you, in the decision you’ve made on Roman’s behalf to raise him in affiliation with this community of faith. By the Spirit’s power, we have each been drawn into God’s embrace and we delight in the part this church has been invited to play in extending God’s abundant welcome to this beloved child of God. In the words of Philip Doddridge, from his great Methodist hymn:

REFRAIN: (*sing...*) Happy day, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away. He taught me how to watch and pray, and live rejoicing every day. Happy day, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away. Amen.

©Nada B. Sellers, 2016, all rights reserved.

---

<sup>4</sup> B. Wren Stainer & Bell Ltd., 1993; *Chalice Hymnal* #375