

“Signs of Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Baptism of the Lord – January 8, 2017

Matthew 3: 13-17

October 31, ten months from now, will mark the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses of protest to the door of the cathedral in Wittenburg, Germany. And with that form of protest, the Protestant Reformation was born. It was a movement that sought reform of the Roman Catholic Church. It eventually led to the formation of many denominations within the broad Protestant faith, including our own Reformed, Presbyterian Church. We will mark this anniversary in October here at John Knox with a special worship celebration. And I would strongly encourage you to take advantage of a great learning opportunity which Gary Shaw will offer this month and next in the Winter Seminar Series. He will not only talk about the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, but also the 500 years since that day in Germany, and how the Reformation has shaped history, culture, and society in our country and throughout the world.

One of the key theological differences that Luther and John Calvin had with the Catholic Church was their understanding of the sacraments. I know some of you grew up in the Catholic Church, or have family or friends who are Catholic. So when you hear the word “sacrament,” you might think of rituals or ceremonies like marriage, or confirmation, or anointing of the sick, and so on.

But for the Reformers like Luther and Calvin, they believed that the sacraments were rooted in Jesus’ life and what he himself experienced or instituted. That is why as Presbyterians, there are two sacraments in our life of faith: baptism and communion. John Calvin called these “visible signs of God’s invisible grace.”

The confirmation class will be talking about the sacraments when it meets next Sunday. And I always share this description from John Calvin with them when we talk about the sacraments, because I believe it succinctly and beautifully explains what we believe is happening in these two acts of faith. Elements that are visible and ordinary in our daily life – water, bread, juice or wine – are infused with the Spirit to remind us of our rebirth and constant nourishment by God’s grace.

On this Sunday after Epiphany, we celebrate the fact that Jesus was baptized at the beginning of his ministry by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. What I find interesting about Jesus’ baptism is that there wasn’t a debate over how he was to be baptized. No, the debate in this case was whether John should baptize Jesus at all. John was unsure as to his authority to do such a thing for the “one who is more powerful

than I coming after me" (3:11). He knew how great Jesus was to be, for the two of them were the gifts of the Holy Spirit to Elizabeth and Mary. Jesus was the King of kings who would come to judge the world, to separate the wheat from the chaff, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, not with water. Why would Jesus want John to baptize him with water, when he was the Son of God?

Jesus answers his question by saying: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." It is not a clear answer, but it points to who Jesus is and what his role is in God's plan. Jesus is God in flesh and bone, a human being who walks and talks and thinks and feels. It is "proper" for Jesus to come to John who baptizes humans, for it is as a human being that Jesus is to minister to God's world. It is as a human being that he teaches God's Word, heals the lame, cures the sick, welcomes the children, rebukes the Pharisees, and experiences the pain and suffering of death on a cross. Jesus is God's agent of change and love and peace to the world, and is sealed as God's agent in his human baptism in the Jordan. Only his baptism is marked by the arrival of the Holy Spirit, a sign that God is truly a part of what he is doing. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17).

Everyone should hear that statement whenever someone is baptized in the church. "This is my son, my daughter, my children, with whom I am well pleased." The sign of baptism is that we as Christians are sealed by the grace of God with water, as was the case with Jesus in the Jordan. It is a ritual that remembers his action, an example to his disciples and to us all. In baptism we are claimed by God, we are protected by God, we are moved by God and the Spirit to be agents of God for the glory of God. Jesus insisted on being baptized by John so that those who follow him would do so in remembrance of him.

Today we not only remember Jesus' baptism, but we also will celebrate the Lord's Supper. Both sacraments are visibly represented and will be enacted in our worship today. We use physical objects that represent these sacraments in our worship space every week, even when we are not partaking of them.

This table is not an altar – it is a communion table, which reminds us of the table that Jesus sat at with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. It is around this table that we gather, and from which we are fed. We receive pieces of bread, and know that Christ's body is broken for us. We receive cups of juice, and we know that Christ's blood is shed for us. Later in our service, we will receive these ordinary, earthly elements, and know that these are signs of grace to us, for us, and with us.

And this font holds a bowl of water, which reminds us of the waters of the River Jordan that Jesus himself was baptized in by John. Today, we have placed these small glass stones in the bowl, and as you

leave the worship space today, you are invited to reach in and take a stone with you. Place it in your pocket, or in your car, or on your nightstand, or someplace that is familiar, so you might remember constantly this sign of grace to us, for us, and with us.

Because while this earthly water will eventually evaporate and dry off your skin, the waters of baptism stay with you your entire earthly life. They claim you as God's very own, and they envelope you with God's love. They strengthen you in the moments when you are weak, and they embolden you when you are unsure. They comfort you when you doubt, and they heal you when you suffer and are in pain. These waters will never wash off, because God's love for you in Jesus Christ will never cease.

But these waters are not just for our benefit; they are for the building up of God's kingdom. They claim us as Christ's disciples, which means they claim us for God's purposes. They compel us to not only think about ourselves, but instead to first think of others. They move us, motivate us, and inspire us to not think of the church as a club, or as a means to serve our own personal ends. We are baptized into the Body of Christ so that God's light and grace might bring justice to the oppressed, strength to the weak, and hope to the hopeless. These waters are not just for our benefit; they are first and foremost for God's benefit, so that Christ's Church might grow and thrive.

As we celebrate these visible signs of God's grace, may we always and forever live lives that let others know our deep gratitude of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.