

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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“Baffling”

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

I’ve been spending a lot of time in skull theatre.

That’s the place you hang out in your head and ruminate to an unhealthy degree. For some reason, I’ve been experiencing a flood of the many cringe-worthy moments across my life.

Some I've made peace with and some I don't know how to make right or what to do around the broken places or the places I've broken. In most cases, it's not what I actually did or didn't do that gnaws at me, but the way I *feel* about what I did or did not do.

Lights, camera, action!

Ugh.

On the stage of skull theatre, as the house lights dim, the set lights come up, almost blinding me, illuminating every flaw and imperfection on my already ugly stories.

I'm trying to imagine a scene whereby in any of the places I turned my back on some of God's commandments, God would look at me, calling me Beloved while pouring Her spirit over me and telling me that He in me, He was well-pleased.

The truth is that because of and through baptism? That is essentially what God does and is doing. God, through the mystery of forgiveness, is helping to ease those painful scenes across our lives.

Forgiveness is one of the central themes of Christianity and as such, what could and should be used as an invitational and transformational message, is instead often hideously distorted to beat people up, shaming folks or forcing them into confession, frightening them by what will happen if they don't, ultimately making God look awfully small and kinda creepy with the most detrimental effects of all — destroying a loving and mysterious “message” and damaging the opportunity to help others move *closer* to God.

Closer to mysterious words, with glimpses of things like mercy, grace, acceptance, baffling peace and unfathomable love.

In Doug's fine reading of our lesson, he shared the text that signals and reveals what Epiphany is all about — God in Christ, Jesus set apart as God's Son, God's Divine agent to bring about the good news that John the Baptist proclaimed was coming.

The kingdom is near.

The thing about Biblical good news is this:

If it ain't for everybody, then it ain't that good.

What makes this news extraordinary is that it's for everybody.

And if anybody ever talks to you about God and Jesus in a way that keeps ANYBODY out, then that's a false message, it's not good news and it's not what Jesus came to teach.

Jesus knew there'd be a lot of false messages and false voices.

That's why he said *follow me* . . . meaning follow his voice and his teachings because he, in turn, was following God.

So back to baptism. Mainline Protestantism churches — which is what the UCC falls under — observes two sacraments. Holy Communion and Baptism. Both sacraments serve as outward and visible signs of an inward claim on us *from* God. There is nothing we can do, but show up and believe these potentially transformative acts of profound GRACE.

What we are showing up to, is what God has already done and is doing. VERY important to pay attention to Who is running the show in these sacraments.

Through Communion, our monthly meal of thanksgiving and remembrance, we remember that what God is doing is forgiving us, God is present and God is uniting us in God's Holy Spirit.

Now in Baptism — the point of our lesson today — again, nothing we can do or say, but to be present about what *God does*.

Through baptism, a person is joined with the universal church, the body of Christ.

But **IN** baptism, God works in us the power of forgiveness,
the consequential renewal of the spirit,
and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always.

So . . .

In case any of us gets confused or lost along the way (we likely have been or will be as we are human), I like to interpret this morning's text as God setting the stage.

You may have noticed that the very first thing God does for us as we emerge into this life as a creation of God's is make a claim on *WHOSE* we are.

As Jesus rose out of the baptismal waters, the very first thing God does is declare who Jesus is — basically saying he is mine. And as such, through the divine blueprint, we too are God's beloved.

Isn't that a great start? Before the slate of life can slap together as we fall into action, God has first established that we are God's. And we didn't even have to do anything but show up.

And then, if that wasn't wonderful enough, after this great claim by God on us, God says, *With you, I am well pleased*. Meaning God takes pleasure in us because we are God's.

Just as we are.

So as believers, that is the Holy foundation into which we are born and received. Isn't that good news?

It's wonderful news if you really think about it.

Loved from the get go.

Now, the rest of the story is about forgiveness.

Essentially, because we come from God, God knows us — knew us from the beginning and knew we would really mess things up at times (also known as sinning or separation from God), from a small scale to a tragic degree because, well, we are all so human.

So that we wouldn't stay in a cycle of messing up with no where to go and no guidance and no hope and nothing but brokenness and despair to come from our unexamined sins, Jesus taught us about God's grace and mercy through this baffling act of God's called *forgiveness*.

People talk a lot about forgiveness and what it means and how it works. I have no idea how it works. But I'm good with that, because there are some things that are God's and God's alone.

I don't think we need to know how it works, we just need to remember and believe that the point of forgiveness is to be renewed (some people might call that being saved)— hence, the symbolic washing in the waters during a baptism.

And forgiveness is part of God's constancy. Forgiveness happens over and over again — endless takes — because, first and foremost, God loves us and is glad we are God's. And since God desires our nearness, we are invited to return again and again.

I think the beauty of forgiveness is that when we take the time to think about it and dwell in its mystery, it makes us want to do better and be better people.

When we understand it is a gift of grace from God, and that we don't have to beg for it, perform for it, jump through hoops for it,

it makes us want to extend the same grace to others. And in the end, forgiveness *becomes a way of being* in the world . . .

That's the power forgiveness can have.

My advice? Get out of the skull and get into the water. Next time you shower or wash your hands or brush your teeth or walk in the snow or watch the tide, get lost in the fog or cloud gazing . . . behold God the symbolic element of forgiveness. It's simply everywhere and we are constantly surrounded by it. It an invitation of grace that comes to us again and again in endless forms.

As we come to the end of worship, I'd like to invite us all to take the time to participate — or just watch — in a baptism renewal. If you have not been baptized, participate anyway and allow yourself to consider the mystery and wonder of this act of grace that comes from God. Don't worry, you don't have to confess or do anything weird . . .

(Bowls
of water)