

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 6, 2020

“Living Faithfully with a Baptismal Paradox”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: 7:17-23

Christian Scripture: Matthew 18:1-6



I baptize you in the name
of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit

My son will be departing for university this week. I grieve because we have been great father/son roommates since March. He is a wonderful child.



One of our great joys has been watching the Netflix series “The Last Kingdom” about a half-Danish Viking, half-Saxon warrior named Uhtred of Bebbanburg.



In the very first episode there is a scene where the King's priest, Father Beocca, baptizes Uhtred when he is a five year old boy ... by full immersion. And when I mean immersion, I mean immersion! One could count to twenty, slowly, while the poor boy was forcibly held underwater. Not until bubbles could be seen, signalling drowning, did Father Beocca bring the boy up, gasping for air and choking. Needless to say, our baptism this morning will not be half as dramatic at that! I promise!



Friends, you may think it strange that I chose a scripture from Genesis, a scripture telling of the great Flood that caused the death of so much life on Earth. But water is a dangerous thing. My father, watching in Burlington, served on a Trident submarine. He knows water is deadly. My mother, also watching in Burlington, was a lifeguard. She knows how deadly water can be. God used water to wipe-out life in the Flood. Scary stuff. We also know it was the Red Sea

that extinguished Pharaoh's entire army. After the divisions of the sea, a tsunami. Water is lethal.



The reason why Father Beocca held the young child Uhtred under water so long was because Christian baptism symbolizes rising from the dead. To not have breath is to not have life. So, by withholding breath one recreates death.



Then when one is brought-up from the water, finally, there is new life! That exhilarating feeling of that first gasp of air, that first deep intake of oxygen, is one that borders on euphoria. One feels fresh, washed, and cleaned. This is why the apostle Paul states in his letter to the Romans: "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his,

we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— (Romans 6:3-6).

Immersion baptism is meaningful if we are celebrating the freedom of sin – the freedom from the curse of Original Sin, that is death.

Yet, today, there will be no immersion baptism.



Today, we will soon be at the font and we will sprinkle water on Allegra's head. There will be no lamenting and dwelling on Original Sin – and consequently no simulation of death and rebirth. Instead, what we will symbolize is God's blessing.



Remember when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well? Jesus spoke about what he called the 'Living Water' that he provides: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will

never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14) In this scripture, the symbolism of water is not that of bringing death, but rather life! And life eternal. Water gives life! This is a biological truth and a theological truth. For the human body is composed of up to sixty percent water.



So, rather than Original Sin, today at the font, with some sprinkles of water, we focus on the truth that this child is made in the *imago Dei*, in the ‘image of God’. At the font with the water, we declare to everyone who will listen that Allegra is created by God (although I will admit Teddy and Gabby had a little something to do with it); Allegra is loved by God; Allegra is blessed by God. In fact, Allegra is a reflection, a testimony, of God’s very self! Allegra therefore is a living, breathing, sixty per cent water celebration of God!

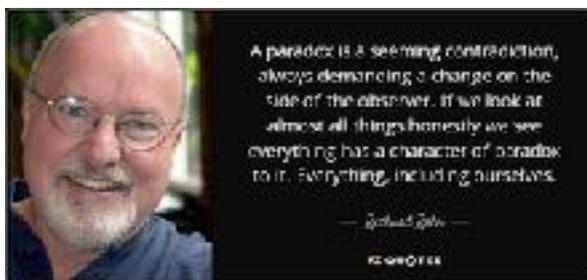
Now to conclude: a note to the parents, and to the families, and to the community of faith gathered here. If Allegra is a living breathing celebration of God, you better darn well celebrate her every day! For by celebrating this child, you celebrate God. Be sure you cultivate the kingdom of God by nurturing

Allegra. For she represents the Kingdom of God. Jesus affirmed how children are trusting, dependent, and vulnerable.



Jesus advised: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. God asks us as adults to be like children in our relationship with God: trusting, dependent, and vulnerable. Yet, as we grow older sadly we gain more and more confidence in ourselves, we become more cynical, less dependent, and even down-right defiant against God.

Before COVID, Nan Mann and I listened to Father Richard Rohr regularly. One of Father Rohr’s requirements for any person who aspires to be spiritually mature is that he or she can deal with, accept, and even embrace paradox.



Father Rohr says that “A paradox is a seeming contradiction, always demanding a change on the side of the observer. If we look at almost all things honestly we

see everything has a character of paradox to it. Everything, including ourselves.”

Today, I baptize Allegra Louise Martin with the water that will baptise her into Christ’s death and the water of Christ that provides eternal life.



Friends in Christ, let us saturate ourselves with that paradox and let us pray that this truth will soak into the very depths of our beings.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.