

Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
10 January 2010

*Baptism of Our Lord: Ps 29: 1-7, 10-14; Isa 43:1-7;
Acts 8:14-17; Lk 3:15-17, 21-22*

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Hooray! We have a baptism on the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord! Maggie, the new daughter of Christine Dacier and Sue Pierce, and Janie's new sister, is joining us today as a member of the body of Christ at Grace Epiphany. It's a very happy day, and a wonderful way of putting an exclamation point to a whirlwind Christmas/New Year season.

I frequently get calls—I just got one during the Christmas fortnight while lying in bed sick as a dog—asking whether I'd be willing to baptize people who have no intention of joining this church or any church. This last time I managed to duck the situation by telling the person how sick I was. But the real discussion to be had at that moment is a complicated and delicate one. I'm afraid that some people think that baptism is a purely individual sacrament: that if a priest or minister pours water on a little baby inside a church building, something grace-filled or magical happens to that little baby in the eyes of God, something that differentiates that baby forever from other little babies who don't get the water poured on them.

That's just not the way we understand baptism these days, and I'm not sure it was ever a very useful understanding of baptism. Let's get real: this is not an important day in Maggie's life—at least not to Maggie herself, and if she could somehow learn to talk in the next few hours and tell us what she thinks is important, she would tell us as much. She won't even remember this day, though God willing Sue and Christine and Janie will tell her that this day happened. This day is rather an important day in the life of this community and in the life of our church because today is the day that Maggie comes to us as a gift from God and as a new responsibility that we take on collectively as the church. Today is the day that our life together is unalterably changed because Maggie comes among us as a baptized Christian.

And so I know it sounds unwelcoming to say that I won't baptize a child if the family has no intention of joining this church or any church, but it just doesn't make any sense to me anymore to perpetuate a childish, magical-thinking view of baptism. Baptism is a mysterious ritual, but it's not magic. It is not an individual transaction that is somehow recorded in the heavenly computer database so that God can differentiate the baptized from the unbaptized, so that a person's status in heaven can change from "undocumented" to "legal."

Baptism is a sacrament of the community. It is a set of mutual covenants of the individual to the community and of the community to the individual, and of individual and community together to God. Baptism is not about someone's status in heaven, but it's a set of commitments about how a particular life is going to be lived here on earth, and how a church community is going to be involved in helping that life fulfill those commitments. Baptism is a covenant to live as a minister of God—because to be a baptized member of the church is in fact a ministry. Baptism is the explicit affirmation that from today forward the story of Maggie's life—however it unfolds—is joined with the story of God's people. And for that affirmation to take place and to have any truthfulness, God's people and the individual, God's people and the individual's family,

have to commit to an ongoing relationship with each other. In other words, they all have to commit to being church together.

Fortunately for all of us we none of us have any doubts of the solidity of relationship between this church community and the family of Maggie, Janie, Christine, and Sue. We are completely confident that Maggie's family knows and will continue to learn about the commitments, the covenants, and the affirmations of the ministry of all the baptized.

It is evident that this particular family understands well how their commitments are fed by the work of the Holy Spirit, how the Holy Spirit moves them to make decisions to spread the love of God. It is a family that started with a couple who lives out their abiding love in a world where many people cannot accept that love. It is a family that grows through prayerful extension of God's love to babies in whose lives the original bonds of love somehow were not able to work themselves out in the way the birth families might have wished had circumstances been different. For these reasons Maggie's baptism today is a particular grace for this church, because it reminds us of the wondrous, endlessly creative ways in which God's love can be engendered and spread so that God's kingdom can be made more visible to all of us.

A day of baptism is above all a day of love and hope. It is a day when we can all join our brother Jesus Christ in the water and see the heavens above us open and the Holy Spirit descending on all of us with God's blessing and the joy of God's love: "You are my child," God tells each of us. "You are my child, the Beloved, and with you I am well pleased." How ever often we mess up, how ever far we stray, God's love is the abiding truth in our lives. God's love is with us whether we are baptized or not, but baptism is the sign that we accept God's love into our lives and it is a sign of our commitment that we, like our brother Jesus Christ, will embody that love to others for as long as we have breath. *Baptized in water, sealed by the Spirit, marked with the sign of Christ our King: Born of one Father, we are his children—Joyfully now God's praise we sing.*