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Take a Giant Step

Epiphany 2, a, Jan. 13, 2008

Matt. 3:13-17

What a joy it is to welcome the Chavez family into the life of University Christian Church this morning! A number of weeks ago in conversation with Jenny and Gilbert, we talked about how we at UCC and the rest of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) accept Christians' baptisms from whatever tradition they come, ... understanding that baptism is a once-in-lifetime response to God, we don't rebaptize adults who were previously baptized, and we here don't baptize infants, preferring instead to have a person be baptized by immersion only after she or he is old enough to personally confess one's own faith... using as our model of Jesus' baptism in this morning's reading.

It is important to remind ourselves from time to time about this, because especially our younger family members need the education. I remember the story of the daughter of a pastor, who witnessed her father conducting baptisms in the morning worship service. The pastor said, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." But kids don't always hear so well. So later that afternoon the pastor's daughter filled a big bucket of water to the brim with cold water and started carrying it around to a low table out behind their garage. Her father saw her heading that way and was curious. He rounded the back of the garage just in time to hear his

daughter as she put the family cat through her own version of a baptism, in a solemn tone like her father used, she announced, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and in you goes!"

In this morning's reading, as he rises from his baptism at about age 30, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descend upon himself, and hears a confirmation of his own sense of personal mission with the words from above saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

I've talked with many Disciples of Christ through the years who've also had powerful spiritual experiences at the time of their own baptisms, moving moments of affirmation; a sense of being washed clean and of being given a fresh new start in life. One of the greatest joys in pastoring is the honor of officiating at a baptismal service, because often there is a sense of something truly miraculous going on.... the going down into the water, the symbolic death of the Old Self, and the witnessing a child of God cement himself or herself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And while such a baptismal experience generally comes to us only once, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon can happen much more often... and sometimes in the most surprising, unexpected ways.

Gary Adams of Asheville, North Carolina, thought he didn't have much need for God. He had attended Sunday School as a child, so he knew the basics about God. But as he reached adulthood, Gary saw little need of a higher power. God was, as he put it, "irrelevant" to his life.

Gary got along well with his two co-workers. They were two men who were very enthusiastic about their faith. One thing all three men had in common was their sense of adventure. On December 23, 1996, the three of them went caving together in North Carolina's Nantahala Gorge. One of

them had heard of a waterfall hidden deep in one of the caves, and the men were determined to find it.

While climbing a rope ladder in one of the caves, Gary lost his footing and fell fifty feet to the floor of the cave. When he came to, he didn't know where he was. Worse, he didn't know who he was. Gary was so completely confused, he even forgot how irrelevant God was. So, he lay there praying. Somehow, he knew without a doubt that God was with him. So he prayed, "Lord, let me live long enough to find out who I am and what my life is about..."

A great peace came over Gary. He writes that he suddenly felt "complete." When paramedics reached Gary, one of them said his name, and suddenly Gary's memory returned completely.

The Gary Adams who came out of the cave that day was not the same Gary Adams who had gone in. He was now a man who belonged much more completely to God. But, as he says, he had to forget his old self before he could realize who he really was in God.¹

Gary's prayer, "Lord, let me live long enough to find out who I am and what my life is about..." Is, I think, about as close an expression of what our baptismal state should be, as any I can think of. We know we "aren't there yet," that is, that our understanding is not mature enough, but we have a great sense of the Spirit of God luring forward into a future that will be rich in opportunities to learn, to serve others, to deepen our spiritual connection with the God who welcomes us into the family of faith at baptism.

When I first heard this story of Gary Adams, I remembered that in rock climbing, there's an element in the sport that is called a "commitment move." Imagine that you're tied to the ropes, inching your way up the face

of mountain. You can see that there is another solid foothold to stand on... but it is a bit out of your reach, and the only way to get to it project yourself, to launch yourself from the solid settled place where you currently are, to that new and higher spot above. The challenge is that you have to give up the old spot before you can secure the safety of the next.... And there's no alternative, if you want to really make the full climb that you've aimed for. A "commitment move" names it well.

Last week and again this morning, the Chavez family made such a "commitment move", making a firm decision under the guidance of the Spirit to become a part of the Body of Jesus Christ, the church, through their worship, their study, and their service to others as a part of University Christian Church.

And Jesus, Himself, made a huge commitment at the time of his baptism, to leave the calm and ordered life of a carpenter in Nazareth; first to go out in the desert of Judea for 40 days and nights; to be tested and tried; experience the visceral challenges of the great Adversary of God's ways; all this then as preparation for his public ministry that would be powerful, that would reach out over and over to others, pulling them up from their brokenness, from their lostness, and his way would be daily tinged with the miraculous. It was a "commitment move" that paved the way for each of us that would follow in faithfulness to the call of God.

But the Christian faith isn't a spectator sport. The coming of this new year provides a wonderful opportunity for all the rest of us here to take stock; to try afresh to find the next foot hold the Lord has provided just a bit out of our reach that you and I are challenged to commit to.

My friends, as we begin this New Year of 2008, let us make the **ONE IMPORTANT COMMITMENT** to ourselves and to God, to be ready to

take EVEN A GIANT STEP FORWARD..... And let us make it right now, as we pray together. Let us bow our heads.....

"O GOD, OUR EVERPRESENT LORD,
"LET US LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO FIND OUT WHO WE ARE AND
WHAT OUR LIVES ARE ABOUT..."

WE DO TRULY DESIRE TO KNOW YOU,
AND TO DO YOUR WILL.
WE WANT TO FEEL YOUR DIRECTION IN OUR LIVES.
AND THIS YEAR, AND WE ARE READY TO DO SOMETHING
BOLD IF YOU CALL US FORWARD INTO IT.
WE WILL SET ASIDE TIME AND ENERGY
TO DISCOVER WHAT YOU WOULD TEACH US.
AND WHERE YOU LEAD, WE WILL FOLLOW."

AMEN...

ⁱ From "A Plunge into Darkness," by Gary Adams, Guideposts, May 1998, p. 21-23, as quoted in "On having the right credentials," Dynamic Preaching 14 (1): 22-23 (Seven Worlds, 310F Simmons Road, Knoxville TN 37922), Jan. 1999.