

Embraced by the mystery

Mark 1:9-15

February 22, 2009

I was baptized when I was fourteen years old, by Chris Lyons, then pastor of West Congregational Church in West Peabody, Massachusetts. I wore a white robe over top of my clothes, and when it came my turn, I walked down a set of stairs into a pool of water placed behind a wall and a huge viewing window at the front of the sanctuary of the Baptist church we were using for the service of baptism.

The water was about waist deep. I waded over to where Pastor Lyons was standing and something was said -- I was asked a question or I made a statement about my faith or I spoke the words of a memorized Bible verse or maybe all three -- and then he took hold of me and lowered me backwards into and under the water and raised me back up out of the water. I don't remember what was said, but I do remember that moment, the moment of my baptism, vividly.

I grew up in a family that practiced adult baptism, which meant each of us children decided for ourselves when and if we wanted to be baptized. It was also the rule in my family that you didn't take communion until after you were baptized, so before age fourteen I had never participated in communion. I would simply let the trays of bread and juice pass me by.

I was a believer. I had been a believer for a long time, since early childhood, but, somehow, in some way, I was not ready to be baptized until that day as a freshman in high school. My younger sister was baptized long before I was. She was eagerly evangelizing her school classmates at the age of nine!

But I waited, and I am glad I did, because that day was a most meaningful day in my life, a day that marked me, and changed me, forever. On that day I was embraced by the mystery, embraced by the mystery that is God -- the mighty, glorious, gloriously gracious, unknowable and yet reachable God -- who knew me and reached out to me and welcomed me and embraced me.

So, after that day, I was allowed, by my parents, to participate in communion. I don't remember the first time I did and I don't remember what it felt like. What I do remember is dreading communion Sundays! I dreaded communion because I didn't feel ready, I didn't feel worthy enough, to receive that most precious gift from Jesus. I took it seriously, very seriously, and I didn't feel holy enough, good enough, to deserve it.

You do understand, don't you, that I missed the point of communion entirely?! The bread and wine are not a reward! They are a gift, Jesus' gift of himself, offered freely! Communion is all about grace, all about Jesus' loving invitation, Jesus' loving welcome, to ... all of you! No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey!

Now I not only take communion, it's my job to offer it to you. And still, sometimes, I am anxious about communion Sundays, now because I don't feel worthy enough to serve it! But that misses the point too. It's not about me. It's not my table.

I do understand communion better now. I do understand the weight and meaning it carries in itself, outside of anything I might say or anything you might feel. I understand that here, at the communion table, we are embraced by the mystery, the mystery of the One who welcomes us, forgives us, nourishes us, and calls us into a new way of life, the mystery of the One who meets us here, at the table, every time we eat and drink.

Baptism and communion. These are two sacraments, the only two sacraments recognized by our church and most churches of the Protestant tradition, but two sacraments we share with almost every other Christian tradition, Protestant, Catholic or otherwise.

I have spent much of my career as a minister trying to demystify the sacraments. I don't even especially like the word *sacrament* -- the word referring to an act that is a means of imparting God's grace to the participant. I shy away from using many of the "religious" words used to refer to baptism and communion: *eucharist*, *holy baptism*, *holy communion*. You'll notice in the bulletin, our monthly observance is called "Sharing the Lord's Supper" instead of "Celebrating Holy Communion."

To me, that overtly religious language casts a shadow of religiosity and otherness over the event that puts it outside everyday experience, makes it somehow a "special" ritual done by "special" practitioners for "special" "people." Somehow that language makes the event itself less accessible and less real, less real to life, for all the regular folks like you and me.

I want people to experience the sacrament as something real, something tangible, not just a religious ritual, but something always new, always fresh, because every time you participate, you meet God again in a new and fresh way. I want people to know it's not about magic, as if the water or the bread or the wine possess magical powers or can in and of themselves confer some kind of blessing or some sort of salvation.

No, it's not about the water or the bread or the wine, or making sure you are covered, or touching all the bases, or invoking God's blessing. It is about relationship -- our relationship with God, God's relationship with us. And it's about symbolism. The water and bread and wine are symbols, signs, emblems, reminders, concrete images of God's grace.

Baptism reminds us of God's promise, of God's unconditional love that is offered to us even before we ask -- even from before we were born! -- and as we are put under the water, baptism reminds us that in Christ, with Christ, all that is old and dead in us dies and we are given the gift of a life that is new and fresh and eternal.

And communion reminds us of Jesus. We taste and see the symbols of his body and his blood. We remember his sacrifice. We remember his presence with us. We remember his call to follow. We remember him.

Baptism and communion are signs, reminders, living object lessons of God's love and grace. And so it has been important for me to use imagination and fresh language and new perspectives to bring those signs to life and connect them to you, to us, where we are and how we are. And yet -- and yet -- baptism and communion are more than that, too.

You call us into your church ... to share in Christ's baptism and to eat at his table.

It is Christ's baptism, Christ's table. In baptism and communion we are somehow embraced by the mystery of Christ's presence itself, Christ's own presence with us. We don't just talk about meeting him, or share signs that remind us of him. We do meet him! It is a mystery how it may be so, but at the moment of baptism and in the act of eating and drinking, we are embraced by that mystery.

You call us into your church ... to share in Christ's baptism.

When we are baptized, we are baptized into union with Christ. We are joined to him. We are made one with him. His story becomes our story. His destiny becomes our destiny. His baptism becomes our baptism.

According to the account in Mark's gospel, Jesus' baptism had at least three immediate effects. First, Jesus' baptism brought blessing. As he was raised from the water, Jesus heard God address him: "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you." You are given the same gift, the same blessing, in your baptism. God says to you, "You are mine ... and I am pleased with you!" Wow!

Jesus' baptism brought testing. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness where he was tempted -- seduced by power and pride, distracted by hunger and thirst and need, provoked to take control of his life and do things his own way.

You must know that baptism won't make your life easier. It will make it a lot harder! It is much easier to go with the flow, to say and do what everybody else is saying and doing. It is much harder and riskier to live as a citizen of a different kingdom, a kingdom with values and goals and ways much different than the values and goals and ways of the kingdom of this world.

And Jesus' baptism gave him a job, the job of proclaiming the good news. "The right time has come," he said, "and the kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the good news!"

Your baptism gives you a job, the same job. Your baptism is a call to share the good news, because baptism IS good news, the good news that you are not alone, that you are not on your own, that you do not live in isolation, but joined to God and joined to God's people.

Baptism opens your eyes to see your destiny through God's eyes and God's intention, to see that your destiny is tied to Christ and through Christ to your neighbor, every neighbor. That's the good news: that ours is a common destiny, a destiny that leads us not into strife and toward death, but toward life and into shalom. Who wouldn't want to share that good news!

In baptism, we are joined to Christ and his destiny becomes our destiny. It is like a wedding ceremony, not something magical, but something very real ... something that changes nothing about the love that was already there, but changes everything about the life that is to be ... something that we do by choice and yet is a mystery too in the way it creates in us something that was not there before, something more than the sum of our parts. In baptism, we are wed to Christ, and we are embraced by the mystery.

You call us into your church ... to eat at his table.

How do you feel when you take communion? How are you supposed to feel? Is it a holy moment and, if it is, what does that mean? Should you eat with your eyes closed or your eyes open? Should you be solemn and quiet, or loud and playful? Should you feel humble? Should you feel grateful? Should you feel joyful? Should you feel awed?

You may well feel all of those feelings when you take communion, or none of them! It doesn't matter!

It doesn't matter because the meaning of communion is not in what you feel. Its power is not conveyed through whatever feelings it may or may not produce in you. So please don't have to worry if when you take the bread dipped in the wine you don't feel strangely warmed or enlightened or ... anything!

The meaning of communion is not subjective, but objective, not about what we feel, but about what is ... and that is the mystery. When we eat and drink Jesus meets us, Jesus is with us -- however we might feel! It is a moment of grace, not merely symbolic, but actual grace, when Jesus comes to us in the bread and in the wine ... no matter who we are.

And when we eat together, we are joined to each other, whether we feel it or not, whether we like it or not! Whenever we eat and drink it happens. Whenever we eat and drink, we are embraced by the mystery.

You call us into your church ... to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table.

This is the one phrase in this section of the UCC Statement of Faith concerning the church that is less about duty and calling and responsibility, and more about honor and privilege and blessing. We are called into the church to be blessed, to be given the privilege and honor of belonging to Christ, and through Christ to each other.

We are called into the church, not just to do and to serve, but also to be. Just to be. Just to be embraced by the mystery. Just to drink it all in. Just to let it wash over us and put us at peace. Just to rest there -- in the lap of the mystery, in the lap of God -- where we will rest for eternity!