

I. Preparing for Baptism

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We welcome our child

The public welcoming of a child into God's family is a joyous celebration for people of faith. The joy felt upon the arrival of a new life can be expressed in many ways: a blanket for the baby knit by a relative, clothes preciously kept from a previous child, or a room painted and decorated in anticipation of the newborn's homecoming. Baptism is a serious decision involving layers of love beyond the circle of the immediate family. Promises will be spoken, prayers said, and a commitment of love celebrated. Some parents may not be ready for the formal promises of baptism and may prefer a simpler ritual of welcome. One appropriate possibility would be to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the birth of your child within a worship service.

We bring our child for baptism

- Why are you bringing your child for baptism?
- Are there stories told of your baptism? (When? Where? By whom?)
- What difference does baptism make to you?
 - To your child?
 - To your family?
- What are your feelings as you come for baptism?

Following God's commandments to the Jewish people, Jesus was named on the eighth day following his birth, at the time of his circumcision (Luke 2:21). When God called Abram and Sara, their names were changed to Abraham, or "ancestor of many nations", and Sarah, meaning "princess". This change of name indicated a new beginning in their relationship with God.

Baptism, a Greek word meaning "to immerse", is the rite of initiation into the Christian Church. Most Christians agree that the water used for baptism is a symbol and that the quantity used is not as important as its meaning. Children are baptized by aspersion or the sprinkling of a small amount of water. Adults are sometimes baptized in lakes and other large bodies of water.

Baptisms are always performed in the presence of a community of faith gathered for worship. There are no private baptisms, only public and joyous as seen in the example of Abraham, children born into believing households are welcomed into the community of faith. Baptism concerns both the individual and the community and express God's personal love and the community's welcome in God's name.

For further reflection:

Through baptism, I enter into God's FAMILY. Whatever happens to any one of the members of a family affects the others. We celebrate, we laugh, and we cry together; we offer each other advice, courage, and assistance. Because no two of its members are alike, each family has its own way of living and its own traditions. What joy there is when a new child arrives!

The CHURCH is a group whose members are as close as brothers and sisters; it is a family united by a common faith. Each person is unique, but we share the same parent: God, who loves us and whom we love. The celebration of baptism is the welcoming of a new member into the family of God. Just as with a birth, this is an occasion of great joy for the members of the Church.

Resource: Judith Bricault, *Baptized for Life*, p.8.

Prayer:

*O God of life,
who wills new life to be through love created:
born a child, in human family,
shaped in your image, this little child we bring.
With glad thanksgiving before you now we sing.*

- Voices United 446, Margaret Joyce Dickin, 1967.

We love our child unconditionally

As required by the Law of Moses, Jesus was presented to the priest Simeon and to the prophetess Anna at the temple in Jerusalem for a ceremony of purification (Luke 2: 22-38). Recognizing the child's unusual birth, Simeon said, *"With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, prepared in the presence of all peoples: A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles"* (v. 30-32). Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was said of Jesus. Anna *"spoke about the child to all who were waiting for God to set Jerusalem free"* (v. 38). The expectations of Jesus were high.

- What expectations or wishes do you bring at the birth of your child?
- Will your child be pressured into assuming certain roles?
- Are you prepared to seek what is truly in your child's best interests or are you looking to impose your will?
- Do you love this child with conditional or unconditional love?

Are you comfortable saying the following words to your child? Would they offend if used at baptism? Replace the words "little child" with your child's name:

You are loved little child.

*Whether you enjoy learning or struggle with your timetables,
you are loved little child.*

*Whether you sleep through the nights or are awake at 3:00 a.m.,
you are loved little child.*

*Whether your IQ is high or low,
you are loved little child.*

*Whether you break our hearts or make us laugh,
you are loved little child.*

*Whether you are a girl or a boy, gay or straight,
tall or short, fat or thin, funny or sad, you are loved!*

- David Lefneski

God's love is unconditional. Throughout the stories of the Bible can be seen the affirming, eternal love of God. Covenant love is a love beyond emotion which God initiates a mutually binding relationship with us. It is a love that becomes an act of the will. Amazingly, this love is given before we can respond or be worthy of it. We are loved as we are, regardless of what we become. **Grace is ours even before we are able to respond and affirm faith!** The truth of this becomes clear as we love our children whatever their behaviour. We provide for their needs, nurture them and are always

there when they need us. Does not this love not arise from a deep sense of purpose and commitment rather than simply from an emotional attachment? Yes!!

What does it mean to celebrate this unconditional love at baptism?
God spoke these words to the prophet Isaiah:

When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt; the hard trials that come will not hurt you.

For I am the Lord your God...who saves you... you are precious to me...

I love you!

- Isaiah 43:2-4

Personalize this beautiful description of God's love from Romans 8:38-39 by inserting your child's name:

For I am certain that nothing can separate _____ (name) from his love; neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below - there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate _____ (name) from the love of God that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We celebrate God's initiative

As you live a growing, dynamic and loving relationship with your child and those connected with you in a circle of love, remember the role God plays. Baptism celebrates God's initiative of love and our collective response. To God's "yes" we say "yes!" What is God initiating? Relationship!

- When are the times you have felt awe and wonder?
- Who do you address in the dark of night when you feel alone?

From the beginning of the Creation story God seeks relationship. After creating Adam and Eve, God walked through the Garden of Eden in the cool of evening, looking to converse with them (Genesis 3:8). Despite disobedience and bad choices on the part of humankind, God continued to reach out. For example, God called Abraham and Sarah on a journey of faith. Leaving their home, culture and family, they travelled with the promise of a covenant relationship and promise of a homeland:

*I am the Almighty God. Obey me and do what is right!
I will make my covenant with you and give you many descendents...
I will keep my promise to you and to your descendents in future generations as an everlasting covenant.
I will be your God and the God of your descendents...
You must circumcise every baby boy when he is 8 days old...This will show that there is a covenant between you and me.*

- Genesis 17:1-12

Circumcision is a sign that the descendants of Abraham belong to God, that they are God's people. It sets them apart physically from other peoples. As the early Christian community developed a distinct identity, baptism became the sign of belonging. Paul referred to it as a "circumcision of the heart"(Romans 2:29). For Christians, the sign of a covenant relationship with God has shifted from the outward circumcision of male infants to the inner circumcision of the heart for all. Celebrating baptism focuses on God's love for the child, the same covenant love of relationship celebrated throughout the history of the people of God. As adults surround this child with faith and love, God offers us this same love and grace. We too need to comprehend a selfless love that knows sacrifice: "This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but

that God loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven...We love because God first loved us!" (1 John 4:10, 19).

Baptism affirms that grace precedes faith. We receive God's unconditional love before we can respond. Hear these words when holding our child at the font of baptism:

Open our hearts to this mystery:

Before we speak your name -You are already our God.

Before we seek you out-You are near.

Before we call to you -You know our every need.

Before we are able to love-You have loved us.

Open us to this mystery:

*If we can approach you it is not because we are good,
but because you are God!*

Judith Bricault. *Prières pour la Vie*, p. 7, Église Unie, 1990. With permission.

Even if you have neglected to nurture your faith, you are now faced with an opportunity to renew it. Before responding for your child, you need to examine your personal relationship with God as an adult.

- How would you describe your understanding of God at this time?
- Are you open to discovering new images of who God is?
- For example, can you imagine God as a Mother holding you and nursing you?

Baptism is a Christian sacrament

Christ is like a single body, which has many parts...In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit, and we have all been given the one Spirit to drink. All of you are Christ's body, and each a part of it.

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27

Sacrament is the term many Christians use to refer to their sacred practices. Augustine, an early church theologian, spoke of a sacrament as "the visible form of an invisible grace" or as the "sign of a sacred thing." A sacrament invites us to see beyond the symbols of water, a cross, bread and wine to the wonders they represent.

When churches of the Reformed Tradition came into being in the sixteenth century, they attempted to evaluate the traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church in the light of the scriptures. **Most Christians agree that there are two primary sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which are practiced by Christians at the instruction of Jesus.** These are the only two sacraments celebrated in the United Church.

An ecumenical creed that predates any of the divisions in Christendom is the Apostle's Creed. Often used at baptisms where parents are of different church denominations, this creed reminds us that baptism is the rite of initiation for all Christians, regardless of denomination. When describing the Christian Church the creed uses the word "catholic" which means universal. This term is often confused with the name: the Roman Catholic Church. Baptism is not an option for those who would follow Christ, it is a command:

Jesus drew near and said to them: 'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'

- Matthew 28:18-19

The early church adopted baptism as its rite of initiation: "Each one of you must turn away from his sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus-Christ" (Acts 2:38). When people converted to the Christian faith, they were baptized together with all their entire families. This was the case with a Philippian jailer described in the book of Acts (Acts 16:31-33). When children are baptized, they become members of the "catholic" Church.

An elder or leader from the church Session or Board (spiritual leaders) presents the child with these words:

On behalf of the congregation of (name) United Church, I present (name) [and (name)], son/daughter of (name) for initiation into the body of Christ (or catholic Church) through baptism.

Baptism cannot be "owned" by any one Church. It is a gift from God, a Christian sacrament and a means of experiencing God's grace. Consider these words of the apostle Paul to the Church at Ephesus:

*There is one body and one Spirit; we have one hope in Christ.
There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, Creator of us all.*

- Ephesians 4: 4-6

Regardless of denomination, baptism is universally performed in the name of the triune God:

(Name)
I baptize you / We baptize you / You are baptized
in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Matthew 28:19

We will follow Jesus Christ

Jesus says "Come, follow me!" (Matthew 4:19) and invited men and women into a wonderful adventure. They left everything behind to follow Jesus.

To baptize a child is to speak publicly one's belief in God, in Christ and in God's Holy Spirit. It is to answer the call: Will you come and follow me? Before baptism you are asked: "Who is this Jesus to me?" You need to know who he is before you can follow him. The best sources for the teachings of Jesus are the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These texts record sayings directly attributed to Jesus.

Following the way of Christ in one's private and public life is not for the weak of heart. It is demanding to live out the gospel message.

How do you respond to these challenging words that Jesus spoke?

Turn the other cheek.

Love those who hate and revile you.

You must take up your cross and follow me.

To gain life you must lose it.

You must hate your parents and follow me.

Sell all you have and give it to the poor.

Jesus was silent before his accusers and he was willing to do God's will even if this meant dying on the cross. Christians believe that the hate and violence of the cross are not the final word: God's Love raised Christ from the dead. God's Love is greater than hate, greater than death, greater than violence!

Baptism is a sign of new life, a sign of being "born of the spirit and of water" (John 3:5). Through baptism, we identify with Jesus' life, death and resurrection. "By our baptism we were buried with him and shared his death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...so also we might live a new life." (Romans 6:4). This new life begins when a child is

baptized but is only fully realized when that child stands before a congregation to profess his or her own faith. In the Reformed tradition, this moment is called confirmation and completes baptism.

A folk song of unknown origins names this commitment:

I have decided to follow Jesus...

no turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me...

no turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me still I will follow...

no turning back, no turning back.