

Marked Children  
July 23, 2006  
Acts 16: 11 – 15; 25 – 34

We have come together today around a young child named Kristina. She and her mom have come to worship several times, recently, and Kristina is weaving her magic with us – examining us with her big eyes, talking along with me in sermons sometimes as if she wants to participate in everything that is going on! Singing as we sing, in her own tongue. It's summer and the children who are often here are at camp or at cottages which means we are especially enjoying Kristina. So we come together today – Kristina's family, her new godparents, the people who worship in Kilbride and in Carlisle – and God, mysterious love at the centre of the universe who connects us all in this time and place.

God not only connects us to one another now. Today there is a family in El Salvador, standing with their child as he is baptized. God connects us with them. In Lebanon, there are Lebanese Christians and Muslims working together in the Red Cross, bringing relief to people suffering in this sudden war. God connects us with them. Somewhere in the world, environmental activist, Maud Barlow, is talking, writing, working to protect water. When I heard Maud speak recently, I learned that her passion springs through her roots in the United Church and CGIT. God connects us with her and other people who care for creation and God connects us with water itself. In the hearts and imaginations of many of you, there are others you hold close – people who are dead now but who would have loved to be here. God connects us with those people, those we call saints. So it is we come together – the visible and the unseen – to pray and sing and baptize – connected by God and God's love.

Recently I talked with a little boy in kindergarten about baptism. He was going to be baptised, along with his little sister. When kids are old enough to talk about their experience, it's important to engage them in what we are going to do. So we talked about water and washing. I talked to him about belonging to Jesus who loves him. I talked about the mark of Jesus, the cross, that I would put on his forehead.

As I marked my forehead, his hand went to his  
and he said, almost under his breath, "Harry Potter."  
Now it turns out that Harry Potter is one of Colton's favourite stories.  
If you don't know Harry, you need to know that he has a mark  
on his forehead that bothers him when he is in the presence of evil.  
It is a sign of his identity and his gifts.  
It is also an injury that has a layer of loss and sadness.  
Harry's mark was the result of an attack by the Dark Lord, Voltemar.  
Harry's life is always at risk because the Dark Lord  
still wants him dead.  
I was delighted that Colton made that connection  
because it gave me a way to talk about the power of love.  
Harry survived the attack because his mother protected her baby  
by putting her own body in the way,  
taking the brunt of the attack herself, dying so that her baby could live.  
Jesus loves you and me that much and more, I explained.  
He died on a cross so we could live.  
The mark we make on your forehead is that cross.  
It's a reminder of love,  
love that is stronger than evil, stronger than death.  
It means that now you belong to God forever.  
One Sunday, we came together to baptize Colton  
and his little sister.  
He was very much a participant as he received the sacrament.  
Later, at coffee hour, I checked with Colton.  
"Do you feel different now?" I asked.  
"Yes," he said.  
He is marked, connected with God through baptism –  
now and for all time.

We are part of a spiritual tradition that is hundreds, no, thousands,  
of years old.  
That's a challenging idea in this age  
when today and tomorrow and our immediate personal experience  
are seen as the most important reality.  
Just an example: One letter to the editor that I read this week  
was outraged that native people have been talking  
about a treaty right that is a hundred years old –  
the right to travel back and forth across the US-Canada border.  
The writer was outraged because who in their right mind  
would expect that an agreement that old would still be honoured!  
What a short view we hold of reality!  
What an abbreviated sense of history and human experience!  
In the spring I travelled to Turkey where museums house artefacts  
that are dated at 8000 – 9000 years BC.  
As we walked among ruins of Greco-Roman cities

where the apostle Paul once told people about God,  
and about how God had come to people in Jesus,  
it felt to me like Christianity was a relatively new religion!  
What's two thousand years in a story of ten thousand?  
Yet, the story we tell,  
the spiritual path we walk,  
is a rich and varied tradition.  
Within that rich and varied tradition  
are many spiritual practises that can help make our lives meaningful.  
Baptism is one of those ancient practises.  
We baptize one another because Jesus was baptised  
by his cousin, John, in the River Jordan  
and then he began his ministry of healing and teaching.  
We baptize one another because Jesus told those who followed him  
to baptize and we have stories in the bible about people  
who were baptised by Peter and Paul and others.  
We baptize – we pour the water and mark the cross and speak the words of blessing –  
but even as we go through these motions,  
we understand that it is really God who calls and claims us in  
this sacrament called baptism.  
Ours are the hands but it is God who is the real actor here.  
God acted through John when Jesus was baptised.  
God acted through Paul when Lydia and her household were baptised  
and when the jailer and his family were baptised.  
God acts through us who are gathered here today  
when Kristina is baptised.  
It is God who brought the church, the community of the baptised, into existence  
and God continues to create, to shape and to challenge us.  
When God claims this child in baptism,  
God makes her part of the church.

Our church, the United Church, has been doing research  
with people who are in the age group 30 – 45.  
The church wants to learn about what is important  
to people in that age group who do not attend church.  
What they have discovered is that churches do not score high, generally.  
Nothing particular against the United Church – if they know anything about it at all! –  
but churches, and organized religion generally, invoke a lot of suspicion and distrust.  
On the whole, the people interviewed describe the church  
as judgmental, arrogant and unwilling to listen.  
Those are hard things for us to hear.  
My first reaction is – “Well, they just don't know us!”  
Or – “well, the United Church isn't like that!”  
However, I - and we - need to hear this feedback if we are serious about  
developing relationships with people and inviting them  
to be in relationship with church folks and with

the God we know in Jesus.

I was struck by what Paul did when he was visiting the city we read about today.

He went to the places where people who were interested in spirituality might be found.

He went to the river.

He found a group of women praying there.

He sat down with them, among them.

At some point, he told them about this person, Jesus.

I can imagine that there was a conversation, a lot of back and forth,  
an interactive dialogue among them.

It was not a situation where Paul stood on a high platform  
and announced what they should think or believe!

Certainly he had good news to share with them,  
his own story of encountering Jesus to tell them,  
but I suspect that first of all, he listened.

And as he listened, he would have heard about their hopes and dreams,  
the things they worried about and prayed about,  
the struggles and demands of their lives,  
the God they prayed to.

At some point, as they talked together and listened to one another,  
Lydia, already someone who worshipped the Jewish God  
although not herself a Jew,

asked that she and her household be baptised.

She urged Paul and Silas to stay in her home and continue  
the conversations they had begun.

She wanted others to have the chance to hear about Jesus.

God worked through her to bring to birth a church  
in that place.

It was a church without a building because really, church is people, not places.

Church is people who seek to follow Jesus  
and the God we have come to know through him.

Like Lydia and like the jailer, we who are Christians long for our children  
to share the good news we have heard  
about God's love for us and for the world.

Parents who bring their children to be marked with the sign of the cross,  
marked with the love of God,  
marked with the death and new life of Jesus,  
take a bold step.

*You* help build a relationship between your child and God.

*You* will nurture and encourage that relationship  
with your own love, your prayers, the stories you share,  
the wonder at and care for creation you communicate,  
the courage and the joy and the passion you live out.

Parents – and godparents - will support their child's relationship with God,  
the love at the centre of the universe.

They will seek to nurture their own relationship with God,

with the mystery at the centre of life.  
And we pray they will keep in touch with the church  
to support them as they do.  
For, together, across generations of the baptised,  
across the face of the earth,  
we are the church,  
all of us children of God  
marked with the cross of Jesus.

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