

A family once had a backyard pool. It was an above-ground pool without a shallow end. There were life-jackets for the young children who had not yet learned to swim. Some friends were visiting and the children were bobbing in the middle of the pool having a great time. All except one little fellow who was holding on for dear life to the edge. He was frightened and cold. "Hand over hand he went around the edge only occasionally letting go with both hands for a terrified instant." He was so afraid that he was crying. **"Why can they do it, and I can't?" the little boy asked his mother.** "Oh honey," his mother replied, **"It's only that you are afraid. Soon you won't be afraid anymore."** "Really!" he said excitedly. "You mean if I'm not afraid I can do what they can do?" "Yes," she told him, **"they aren't doing anything. They are just letting the water hold them up."** The little boy was quite relieved and before too long was out in the middle of the pool with the rest of the children having a wonderful time. The next day his mother again took him to the pool. As soon as they got there the little boy went into the water. "He stood in the water for about five minutes," his mother remembers, "and then threw himself in head first."

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. Unfortunately there is a lot of confusion surrounding the sacrament of baptism. **SOME FOLK ARE AFRAID OF THE WATER,** afraid of the commitment that baptism means. Even more people, I'm afraid, have never really appreciated the significance of their baptism. **Let's peel away some of the mystery for a few moments and ask WHAT DOES BAPTISM REALLY MEAN.**

BAPTISM IS A STATEMENT ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVE. There is nothing magical about the water or the liturgy or about the ACT itself. **Baptism has to do with God's GRACE and our response to that GRACE.**

Several years ago, the St. Charles Avenue Christian Church in New Orleans, which is affiliated with the Disciples of Christ denomination, had a serious fire in the sanctuary. In the pre-dawn darkness after the fire was extinguished the assistant fire chief, a Roman Catholic, wandered into the church to inspect the damage to the ceiling. Looking upward with his flashlight he failed to notice where he was stepping. Suddenly he tripped over something on the floor and fell into the church's baptistery. Ironically it was filled with water from the fire hoses. Pulling himself out, the assistant fire chief stumbled and sputtered into the street. He noticed the fire department chaplain coming by and he asked, "Father, who are those people in there?" **The chaplain replied, "They're the Disciples of Christ."** The chief, still soaked from his plunge into the baptistery, responded, **"Well Father, I don't know anything about them but it looks like I'm one of them now."**

Pardon a minor play on words, but it takes more than a plunge into a baptistery Font to make us a disciple of Christ. When we are baptized, we confess our faith in God and also our faith in Christ. We take our stand as a believer.

Such a stand may come about in different ways. Dan Wakefield grew up in the church but left it as an adult. He had been away from the church for over twenty years when he began to feel the tug on his heart. It was no sudden thing. It was a series of events. It seemed to come naturally. **Interestingly it was while he was looking at fish that he first felt this tug.** At the New England Aquarium Dan gazed at the brilliant colors of the small tropical fish. **He realized at that moment that God was the genius behind the fish.** He marveled at their brilliant colors. What really caught his eye were flashlight fish that blinked on and off. Dan wondered how "anyone could think that all this was the result of some chain of accidental explosions!" Dan claims that if just five years before someone had approached him with this argument he would have dismissed it without a second thought.

He wonders if what he experienced beginning with those fish was what others call A CONVERSION? No voice came out of the sky. No thunderclap struck nearby. **Later while attending church his pastor explained that the literal meaning of conversion is "TURNING."** That made sense to Dan. It was as if he'd been walking in one direction and then in response to some inner pull, **he turned** - not even all the way around, but only at what seemed a different angle.

But now he had a new identity. He also had a new set of beliefs. BAPTISM IS A STATEMENT OF WHAT WE BELIEVE.

BAPTISM ALSO SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT WHO WE ARE. **And who we are...are children of God.** Nell Mohny in her book, **Don't Put a Period Where God Put a Comma**, tells about a young lady named Kathy. There was an aliveness about Kathy that was evident as soon as you met her. She exuded energy and interest, joy in being alive, and openness to those she met. Kathy was not always like this. She had grown up in a dysfunctional family where she was a

victim of verbal abuse by her mother and physical abuse by her alcoholic father. **As she described it, she "felt like a big ZERO."** Then something happened that changed her life forever - even though it didn't seem like a big deal at the time. Kathy was in the sixth grade when the girl seated behind her invited her to attend Sunday School. The girl explained that her Sunday school teacher had challenged them to each invite a friend to class. "Do you go to Sunday School and church?" the girl asked Kathy. "No, I don't," was the reply. "Do you want to meet me at the front of my church at 9:30 this Sunday?" asked the girl. And Kathy attended her first Sunday school class.

Mrs. Parsons, the sixth grade Sunday school teacher became, in Kathy's opinion, her guardian angel. She took special interest in Kathy, often inviting her into her home where the two of them had long talks. She told Kathy that God loved her. She said that Jesus' death on the cross shows how much God cares. Mrs. Parsons made a world of difference to Kathy. The story doesn't end here. **A friendship also developed between Mrs. Parsons and Kathy's mother.** Her mother felt as alienated as her daughter. It was Mrs. Parsons who led both mother and daughter to a heart-felt commitment to Jesus Christ. A strong friendship developed between the teacher and the mother as well as with Kathy herself. It was when she could finally forgive her father that Kathy experienced her greatest breakthrough to freedom.

"The Zero has changed to a number ten with an exclamation point," says Kathy of her new life in Christ. "I see myself as a person of great worth," she says, "not because of what I have done, but because of what God has done for me through Christ."

Baptism makes a statement about who we are. We are those for whom Jesus gave his life. We are those so loved by God that He gave His only Son. We are all "ten's" not because of our merit, but because of His.

FINALLY, BAPTISM SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT WHAT WE ARE TO DO.

People who traveled out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist were so caught up in John's message that they were baptized. **Jesus also went to hear John. Jesus was different, though. He wasn't caught up in John's fiery preaching. He went to hear John for the sole purpose of being baptized.** For Jesus baptism was an act of obedience to God. Obedience to God is central to baptism.

Dr. Hendrik Kramer was a missionary in Indonesia for over twenty years. When Dr. Kramer returned home to Holland, the Nazis were over-running his country and arresting Jews who lived there. It was a very difficult time for him to come home. Even Christians who resisted Hitler were being arrested and sent to labor camps. The remaining Christians were drawn to Dr. Kramer for strength and inspiration. Late one night in the cover of darkness some of them slipped into his house. "Tell us what to do," they pleaded, "our Jewish neighbors are being dragged out of their homes and off to the gas chambers. And many of our own are hearing the knock of the Gestapo on the door at night. **Tell us, Herr Doctor, tell us what to do.**" Kramer was silent for a long, long time. Then he spoke with the conviction that characterized his life. **"I cannot tell you what to do," he said, "but I can tell you who you are!" And with that he opened his Bible and began to read.**

The implication is clear. Once we know who we are, we will know what we should do. And what we should do is this – **SEEK TO LIVE THE JESUS LIFE. A life characterized by love and patience, acceptance and forgiveness, courage and compassion. In short - A LIFE LIVED IN OBEDIENCE TO GOD.**

Are you afraid of the water? Are you afraid of claiming your baptism? Are you afraid of living the Jesus life?

Tony Campolo tells of talking to a missionary friend who worked among Muslim people in Pakistan. The friend explained that the first time he baptized a convert from Islam to Christianity the young man bolted out of the water and yelled "Hallelujah!" Then he ran to his friends who had witnessed the baptism, joined hands with them, and wildly danced for joy. Onlookers were sure that such partying antics are always a part of Christian baptism. So now what that first new Christian in the town did that day has become a practice followed by every new Christian who is baptized. **They shout "Hallelujah!" and joined hands with their friends and danced.**

Why shouldn't they shout and dance for joy? A child of God has come from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from legalism to grace. Are you afraid of the water? COME ON IN!! The water is fine. Have you forgotten the significance of your baptism? Baptism is a statement about what we believe, about who we are, and about what we are to do. **BAPTISM GIVE YOU THE ABILITY TO LIVE A WHOLE NEW LIFE HERE AND NOW AND AS YOU STROLL INTO HEAVEN WITH GOD. Enjoy your Gifts from God!! Amen.**