

January 7, 2018

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

As we celebrate Holy Baptism today, you may have noticed that all of today's lessons refer to water, and specifically baptism in the second reading and today's Gospel.

We studied baptism a few weeks ago in the By Heart Bible study. I pulled out a notebook I had saved from my favorite college theology class and found something in my notes that made me think. I had written, "Baptism is a PRESENT state". As in, we ARE baptized. I AM baptized, not WAS.

When we celebrated baptism and reaffirmation of faith the morning of Christmas Eve, and the *ceremony* took place in the *past*, today, Melissa and Paull III ARE baptized in Christ, forever. Just as ARE Lisa and Paul Jr., not WERE.

Our baptism brings us into God's family, forever.

Healthy families have family pride – a healthy family's members are not ashamed to be recognized as a part of that family. Today and forever, we ARE God's family.

I am honored to be a member of this church and I take pride in it. I have had the opportunity to witness the work and love of GLC with two friends this week. When our 2017 annual report is published in a few weeks, I hope you'll take some time to read it, as it will evidence with a review of all of our activities for the year how much we have grown in our mission to serve.

But, have you ever heard the expression, "You can't pour from an empty cup"?

As we continue with our missional work, it is important that we take the time to review our health as a congregation.

On January 21<sup>st</sup> you are invited and encouraged to attend the Healthy Congregations workshop we have lined up. Valerie Webdell from the Lutheran Deaconess Association will lead us through the workshop.

Healthy Congregations is a systems approach to making the life of our congregation a better place within which to live and serve and belong. I'll explain a little more.

When you think about "health", what comes to mind?

Perhaps it is physical health, wellness of body, nutrition or physical activity. How many of us have made resolutions in the New Year to get healthy, and possibly renewed gym memberships? And how are we doing?

Perhaps you may think of mental or emotional health, how we feel about ourselves and express our emotions. Intentional living and mindfulness. You may hear those words more and more.

Living intentionally means an awareness that you – and only you – make choices for yourself, every day, all day long.

Our freedom in baptism brings free will, right? So only you are responsible for the choices that you make.

On top of that, you need to be aware of the choice you make in how you respond to everyone else's choices that THEY make that might affect you.

Sometimes that means praying for those people, or walking away, or taking some deep breaths.

Some of you know that I practice mindfulness and meditation, and have introduced prayer meditation before some Council meetings last year.

If we can do a small exercise together:

Everyone please sit up

Imagine that there is a string is coming out of the top of your head, gently pulling your spine up straight

Now take a breath in and breathe out

Once again, in and out

Now this time,

Pay close attention to your breath and your body as you breathe

Place your hand on your stomach and feel your belly fill up and get big – yes, let your belly get big – as you inhale and feel it go down as you breathe out

Maybe count the seconds of the breath in and your breath out

Once again, in and out

Did you know, in those few seconds, you physically lowered your blood pressure? Do you feel any different? Maybe not. It's OK – keep practicing.

If you did notice a little change, imagine what a few minutes of quiet, intentional breathing each day might do for you. Before you walk into work. Or when you're in a stressful situation. Or dealing with a difficult person. Imagine what adding a small prayer to those few minutes might do.

I found myself needing to go to the grocery store two days before Christmas. I knew I had to mentally prepare for what I was about to get myself into. I parked in the first parking space I found and took a deep breath and told myself, "None of us wants to be here. We all have the same goal of getting our things, checking out and getting back on our own merry ways as soon as possible."

My husband Jason has a long commute to Michigan City for work. He's in the car for 90 minutes round-trip on a good day. He chooses to use this time for prayer. He told me that day he prayed for me and my trip to the grocery store.

And whether it was his prayer, my breathing, or mindfulness, or likely all of it, I was parked, in and out of the store and on my way back home in 20 minutes – the Saturday before Christmas. And you bet I said a prayer of thanks on my way home.

Living intentionally is choosing. Choosing to be thankful, choosing to be helpful, to pray for others.

What about our Spiritual health? Living spiritually can give us a sense of purpose and meaning.

It influences all of those choices we make and the actions we take. Spirituality affects perceptions of the world around us, doesn't it? It gives us peace. I find that when I am not feeling at peace, my focus is everywhere but on God.

Look at how long it takes us to share the peace every Sunday. It feels GOOD. We hug. We smile. Couldn't we "share the peace" with everyone, all the time?

Social health and healthy conversation are important too.

Our ability to interact with family, friends and others, to form and maintain personal relationships, to squash those conversations that begin with, "This is what I heard..." These are all part of social healthiness.

We will be voting on the 2018 budget after the service today. Copies have been made available in the Narthex.

You may "have heard" and hopefully have seen that there is a line item beginning in May to fund a Deaconess intern. This is true. This decision was made by Council after a year and a half of discussion and discernment during participation in the Area Mission Conversation.

You may also "have heard" or possibly assumed that the Deaconess intern represented by that line item will be me. This is not true.

Yes, I applied to the LDA program and was accepted – praise God. I will begin the program this March. No, I will not be the Deaconess intern in May.

However, I am very enthusiastic to work with whomever that person may be, and I have faith that whatever I learn and absorb through my education in the program will be shared with my church. I am very excited for this opportunity not just for myself, but for all of us.

I also look forward to the Healthy Congregations workshop. Healthy Congregations' purpose is to *facilitate* and *nurture* intentional health ministries by promoting spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being.

We will work on:

How we communicate with each other

Communication skills and problem solving

How to understand others, and where they are coming from

And all of the other healthiness I mentioned earlier

Doesn't *all* of that sound fantastic? I encourage everyone to please attend the workshop on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Lunch will be served that day and we will need to order program materials, so please sign up in the Narthex today so that we have an idea of how many to plan for.

I also ask you to please stay for the budget vote. It won't take long, and it concerns all of you as members of this congregation.

All church members are invited to attend any Council meeting – not only Congregational meetings. The difference between the two is that at Council meetings, only Council members – who are our officers and board chairs – have a vote. But everyone has a voice at every meeting.

Be emboldened to share your thoughts and input, which are most welcome.

Our first Council meeting for 2018 is tomorrow at 7:00 PM. Our incoming Council President Mike Bratcher will outline the goals we have for 2018. And they are great goals that support our mission – I've seen them!

As baptized members in the family of God, let's be healthier in the New Year so that we may continue our mission of growing Christ-centered relationships in our communities through love and service.

To close with a reading from 1 Thessalonians, "May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together – spirit, soul, and body – and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Amen,  
Carrie Sovola