

Scripture: Mark 1:4-11
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At the signing of the Declaration of Independence, when Benjamin Franklin emerged from Independence Hall, he was recognized by a woman who asked him, “What kind of government are you giving us?” “A republic, Madam, if you can keep it.”

A republic is defined as a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and which has an elected president rather than a king. . . . Yesterday, as we marked two years since the storming of the US Capital, we wonder: Are we keeping our republic? Can our divided national house stand? And, for people of faith, does our faith and does our scripture have anything to say about that?

Years ago, the Reverend William Sloane Coffin , a United Church of Christ pastor, and activist, said, “Individuals and nations are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. They are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity, offering prayers of thanks that there is more mercy in God than sin in us.”

Today , we remember Jesus’ baptism, and our baptism. Jesus symbolically shows dying to the old forms in the world. As Jesus rose from the waters of baptism, he demonstrated the way of the New Human Being and pointed the way for all of us. He showed with his life and teaching that his way, is the way of compassion for the most vulnerable, and a unity of all, based in Divine love.

Like many theological concepts, there are multiple layers to the meaning of baptism. We baptize infants, showing that we do not simply belong to our earthly parents, not only to this world and its conventional ways and power, but from the very beginning, we belong first to God. We are made in God’s image.

We always baptize in community. Baptism is not an act of individual devotion to God, but a promise made within community to love, nurture, teach, and support in light and path of Christ. The way of Christ is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Another level of baptism is that it is a portal into church membership. In baptism, we renounce evil and turn toward God. We affirm our kinship with the Beloved Community.

Though, in Jesus’ baptism, obviously, he wasn’t joining a Christian church. Nor was he acting in a ritual for his own Jewish faith. We read that John the Baptist was baptizing for the repentance of sin. Though we think of Jesus as without sin, he was fully human, and therefore, part of the oppressive system and world views of his time. His baptism was demonstrating that though he was human, first, he is God’s. The path he would walk was always a reminder that he is God’s beloved. We are also called to that same, loving, higher allegiance.

Doesn't this speak to our moment in time? We are reminded in baptism that we are called to our God-given kinship with all humanity. In baptism, we are reminded that there is more mercy in God than sin in us.

Yesterday, January 6, was also the day of Epiphany, when we recall the bright star that led the magi from a foreign land to find the infant Jesus with his parents. The king, Herod, would slaughter the innocents for fear of losing his power as a ruler. Yet that did not stop the magi from finding their way to the manger-side, a symbol of the Light of God, not just for the Jews who were waiting for a messiah but for all nations.

The Christmas carol *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* expresses it this way: "Light and life, to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings ... Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth ..."

"Second birth" is what we witness in the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Second birth happened in your baptism and mine. Second birth happens when justice and mercy transform what is broken in our institutions, and in us. Second birth can happen when the lid is torn off and revealed are the ugly things: fear, vengeance, narrow self-concern, and lies. When those things are exposed, we can then intentionally turn away from sin, and move to set things right.

Now, I want to be clear that reconciliation cannot happen unless both parties desire it. What do we do when the "other" doesn't want to reconcile? Well, first, we must resist dehumanizing anyone, with our thoughts, words or actions.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let's remember that first, we belong to God. The image of God is imprinted on each person's face. Our scripture reminds us to claim our God-given kinship with one another. Justice, reconciliation, and peace are made possible because we are each God's children, and God's love binds us together.

After the 2016 election, poet Kim Stafford (a former Oregon Poet Laureate) wrote a book of poems called *The Flavor of Unity: Post-Election Poems*. These are his words:

The flavor that makes us one cannot be bought/or sold, does not belong to a country,
cannot/enrich the rich or be denied to the poor./The flavor that makes us one emanates from the
earth./ A butterfly can find it, a child in a house of grass, exiles/coming home at last to taste wind
off the sea, rain/ falling into the trees, mist rising from home ground./ The flavor that makes us
one we must feed /To one another with songs, kind words, and/ human glances across the silent
square.

The simple kindnesses we offer to one another is a sign of God's love in us, and our second birth. I swim laps at the LA fitness in the mornings. There are just 3 lanes, and each one can be shared by two swimmers side by side, or by a single swimmer, if it's a slow morning. This past week, I was about to split the lane with a man already in the pool, when the far lane opened up. I left my water bottle and flip-flops at the end of the pool and hopped in for my swim-meditation

time. After a while, another swimmer joined me, and we split the lane. I noticed that the lane I was going to share was suddenly vacated by that initial swimmer (I don't know his name, but we see each other several times a week there.) I swam across the end of the pool, to now have a lane to myself again. I knew that I was leaving my flip flops and water bottle in the old spot, and would need to collect them when I was done. To my surprise, and delight, when I reached the end of the pool in the new lane, my water bottle was waiting, and so were my shoes! I saw that the swimmer had noticed my switching lanes, and moved my things for me! It was a simple kindness. But somehow, it also communicated cooperation, even love and caring. I felt that his thoughtful action was a way of showing me God's love. My friends, every day, we have the opportunity, through our kind actions, through our benevolent thoughts, through our telling the truth in love, in our loving others as we love the self—every day, we are invited to show the signs of our second birth, in love.

Just before the end of the Civil War, in 1865 on March the fourth, Abraham Lincoln concluded his second inaugural address with powerful words. Keep in mind what was happening in that moment: states and families were in bitter conflict and grieving the lives of many lost.

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Lincoln knew that in the moment of a national crisis, a moment of great danger, that such a moment was a moment of decision, when a nation, when a people, must decide: who shall we be? What kind of nation shall we be?

Remember, my friends, we can trust--there is more mercy in God, than sin in us.

So, what kind of people shall we be?