

**BAPTISMAL AFFIRMATION**  
**Sermon, January 8, 2012**  
**Baptism of the Lord Sunday**  
**Text: Mark 1:4-11**

It is fitting that Baptism of the Lord Sunday is today, January 8. Have you ever noticed that the baptismal font has eight sides? There is a reason for that; it is not just decorative. The eight sides of the font are witness to what theologians call the eighth day of creation. Some refer to the Day of Jesus' resurrection as the eighth day of creation, the First Day of God's new re-created order which will reach its culmination on the Final Day, in the consummation of all history. Just as the Jews were brought into the covenant through circumcision on the eighth day, just as the world was recreated via the eight people on the ark, so re-creation begins on the symbolic eighth day ... hence the eight sided font, where we are united with Christ in our baptisms. Through baptism, we are sacramentally given new life in Christ, united with Him in His death, and reborn and united with Him in His resurrection on the eighth day, and launched into a life of service to Him.

Today we remember the Baptism of the Lord. As we begin this New Year, it is an especially appropriate time for us to reflect on the meaning of Christian baptism, and to think afresh about those commitments we made, or were made for us and we later confirmed. At the end of the sermon we will be given opportunity to remember as well as to reaffirm our own baptisms. For now, though, I'd like to do a slightly different take on this account from any I've taken before, and I'd like to begin with a story.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, two altar boys served in two Roman Catholic churches thousands of miles from each other. One was born May 7, 1892 in the little Croatian village of Kumrovec. The other was born just three years and a day later in El Paso, Illinois (near Peoria); May 8, 1895. Though they lived very separate lives in very different parts of the world, these two altar boys had almost identical experiences. Each boy was given the opportunity to assist his parish priest in the service of Communion. And each boy, while handling the communion cup, accidentally spilled some of the wine on the carpet. There the similarities end.

The priest in the Croatian church, seeing the purple stain on the carpet, slapped the little altar boy hard, across the face, and shouted, "Clumsy oaf! Leave the altar!" That little boy left. He also left the church ... for good. That little boy grew up to become an atheist and a staunch Communist. He was the strongman dictator of Yugoslavia from 1943 to 1980. His name was Josip Broz Tito.

The priest in the church in Illinois, upon seeing the stain near the altar, knelt down to the little boy's level, looked him tenderly in the eyes and said, "It's all right, son. You'll do better next time. You'll be a fine priest for God someday." That little boy grew up to become the much loved Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (*known for his preaching and especially his work on television and radio, he was the first televangelist ... his most well-known programs **The Catholic Hour** and **Life Is Worth Living***) Two young boys, similar in age, with two similar experiences, but with radically different endings. <sup>1</sup> These were two young boys with a universal human need: the need to be encouraged, appreciated, affirmed, loved.

Another story: Harriett Beecher Stowe (*author of **Uncle Tom's Cabin***) achieved her first triumph as an author at the age of twelve. She was a student at Litchfield Academy in CT. With the other Litchfield students, she was required to submit an essay at the end of the term. Her essay was awarded first prize by the unanimous vote of the judges and was one of two essays read by the headmaster at the graduation ceremony that year. So outstanding was her paper, the audience applauded when it was read. When it was announced that twelve year old Harriett was the author of this paper (*and not one of the much older graduating seniors*), her father smiled proudly. Her father was on the stage with the headmaster; he had given the ceremonial invocation; Lyman Beecher was the renowned pastor of the local Presbyterian church. According to Harriett Beecher Stowe's biographer, Noel Gerson, seeing her father's proud smile was a reward Harriett cherished as long as she lived. Mr. Gerson wrote, "*Neither the honors nor the success she won in later life meant as much to her [as her father's smile], and, in effect, her career was determined.*"<sup>2</sup> Deep within the heart of every young person is the need to have a father or a mother smile and say, "Well done. I'm proud of you. You're a good kid!"

I don't think there is a son or daughter in this world who is not thrilled by praise from a parent, regardless of age. I'm well into my fifties, and I still preen for my parents' affirmation, and still feel the warm inner glow of

confidence their affirmation has given each time it is given. Still. Another story: When baseball great Henry Aaron hit his 715<sup>th</sup> home run breaking Babe Ruth's remarkable record, he said in an interview with George Plimpton: "I don't remember the noise, or the commotion on the field. My teammates at home plate, I [sort of] remember seeing them. I remember my mother out there and she hugging me. When I think back on it, that's what I remember more than anything about that home run. I don't know where she came from, but she was there." Hank Aaron, veteran ballplayer, known and applauded by millions, but what he remembered and treasured most was his mother's pride and affirmation when he broke that record. Few of us ever escape the desire to please our parents. For some, that remains a lifelong primary motivation that drives them on to success, even though their parents may have been gone for many years. Many of us are always striving to please Dad or Mom. For some, sadly, that is a crushing burden to carry; some are haunted by the specter of un-affirming parents who could never be satisfied, parents whose preferred mode of "nurture" is constant "not-good-enough" criticism. No matter what they did, they could never seem to measure up, and no matter what they continue to do, they never feel they measure up to what was perceived as parental demands. Contrast Hank Aaron's mother with the woman in feminist author Faye Welden's 1976 book, **Female Friends**, who actually expressed relief that her mother had died, saying that now there is one less pair of eyes to judge her. For better or worse, rare is that person who does not want to please Mom or Dad.

It also works the other way. Who among us parents doesn't want our children to be proud of us? Quaker philosopher, professor and writer Rufus Jones once wrote that he spent a lifetime measuring up to the accolades of his son who died at the age of eleven. Writing more than forty years after his son's death, Jones wrote: "I overheard him once talking with a group of playmates, when each one was telling what he wanted to be when grown up, and Lowell said when his turn came, 'I want to grow up and be a man like my daddy.' Few things in my life have ever touched me as those words did, or have given me a greater impulse to dedication. What kind of a man was I going to be, if I was to be the pattern for my boy?" Rufus Jones became an accomplished man partially because his son was proud of him, and he wanted to live up to that honor. He didn't want to do anything to disappoint. I'm sure many of us parents can relate to that. Who doesn't want their children to be proud of them? Who wants to be the cause of a child's embarrassment or shame? What a powerful bond there is between parent and child. How we love to please one another.

I hope all parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and teachers and coaches and youth leaders in this room are wise enough to tell the children in your care how proud you are of them and how thankful you are for the privilege of having them in your life. I'll add a qualifier to that: Don't do what some parents do ... when they say, "I'm proud," it sounds more like self-congratulation, as if to say, "What a great parent I am." No, that's bragging on yourself, that's not affirming your child. Another qualifier: No matter how hard we work at parenting, there are so many other influences working against us, and there are so many other factors that can come into play. Sometimes a child can lose his or her way. A child can and will make mistakes. A child can and will make bad decisions, even with the best parenting. It's been said that between the ages of twelve and seventeen, a parent can age thirty years. But again, remember our two altar boys. Affirmation and encouragement can make all the difference.

All of this is a really long introduction to our Gospel text for the day (*but don't worry, I'm almost finished*). Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism Jesus heard the voice of God saying to Him, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased!" What a marvelous affirmation! A father pleased with his son. Yes, this was no ordinary son and this was no ordinary father, and analogies can break down, but can you experience the humanness of Jesus on this unforgettable occasion? Can you feel something of the warmth and the jubilation within His heart as He receives God's vocal and public approval? And with that approval, He is launched into His public ministry.

Those of us who are or who hope to be parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, youth leaders, coaches, and so on can learn a lesson from the Father God. Healthy relationships motivate, energize, encourage. Those we baptize (*like little Robert this morning*) are entrusted into our care, they are our family. Just as the Father-God said to Jesus on the day of His baptism, "You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased," so do we need to time and again affirm those who are entrusted to our care ... let them know that we are pleased. Pleased with our responsibility to them and for them, pleased for the kind of young men and young women they are becoming, and pleased that God has given us the privilege of bringing them our way. In so doing we, too, might just launch them into a lifetime of ministry and service; we, too, can play a part in launching a new generation of adults who will go on to make a Godly difference in this world.

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<sup>i</sup> *Mistreated*, Ron Lee Davis, Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1989, pp. 138-139

<sup>ii</sup> *Harriett Beecher Stowe*, New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1976)