Trees

Psalm 1

Buckingham Church

November 7, 2021

Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Many of us began our journey into faith with water, at the baptismal font or pool or lake. Were any of you baptized at this font? I was baptized at the Brecksville Congregational United Church of Christ in Brecksville, Ohio, when I was about 4 years old, along with my two younger brothers. I was what clergy sometimes call “indiscriminately baptized,” that is, my parents made the promises about taking us to church and bringing us up in the faith, but they hadn’t been doing that regularly and didn’t for most of our lives.

And yet something, perhaps my grandmother about whom I spoke last week, or perhaps common practice of the time winning out, led my parents to a church not far from where we lived at the time and to the waters of the font. For whatever reason, and I like to think it was the sometimes odd sense of humor of the Holy Spirit, I was planted by the waters to grow into the grace of God. That is always the hope and expectation of baptism, that those planted by the waters of the font will bear fruit in due season, fruit of love and truth and joy, fruit of making the world around us a better place, fruit that feeds the world’s hungers using whatever gifts we have been given, fruit that aligns with the kingdom of God and the teachings of Jesus. By the grace of God, I got connected with church again as a teenager, and was helped by so many along the way to grow into the tree I needed to become.

If the water represents the love, mercy, character, and power of God, then the font and those gathered together to support the one being baptized represent the church. The church provides the soil, the care, the teachings, the companionship, and the love needed for each of us to reach maturity and bear fruit. We are rooted in the love of God and fed by the waters of the Spirit, but we are also connected through our roots and branches with the food of the earth and a great forest that sustains us and all who were touched by the waters and many who were not. That’s the church.

The people of Brecksville UCC have absolutely no idea that I have a connection to them. Many of those who were present at my baptism, including the pastor, are certainly no longer living. Those who are may or may not still be with the church. We moved from that town when I was 6, and I have never been back to that church. In a time when so many churches are struggling to stay alive, a time when many wonder if there is any point to continuing to do ministry, I know sometimes people wonder if their church makes any difference at all. It did to me.

I would like someday to go back to Brecksville and tell those folks that though they did not personally nurture my faith, they planted me by the waters, and God continued to work on and in me, and I have tried in my own imperfect way to fulfill those baptismal promises made in their presence by my parents, who were strangers to them. They had an impact far beyond what they knew then or know now.

So have you here at Buckingham Church. So do we now. My other job is with an organization called Partners for Sacred Places, a national organization which works with churches with historic buildings in need of guidance, consulting services, and other programmatic assistance to get the most out of their sacred places in service to their mission and community. We sometimes conduct what is called a Halo study with a church and town or city: we research the impact the church makes in its immediate community. Because we are a secular organization and work with buildings and dollars, we quantify this as how much the church’s work is worth in dollars. Almost always, churches and civic leaders are surprised to discover just what a difference a congregation and its property make in the life of a town! The average church contributes about a million dollars toward the well-being of their community. And that’s just the difference quantified in dollars. There’s no way to quantify lives changed or children bathed in the words of Christ which shape lives of love and service. There’s no way to quantify love and transformation for good, so we don’t try.

So, is the world a better place because Buckingham Church has been here for all these decades? Most certainly. Is the world a place of total beauty and love and grace and peace and justice here or anywhere? Not even close. Which tells us our life as a church has a purpose that is ongoing. Those we have baptized or will baptize need to be enfolded in love and connected to the roots of those planted by the waters of God. Those who are older and struggling with life need to be held up so they can in turn hold others. Those in our communities who are burdened with hunger and homelessness need food, shelter, and clothing. Those in our communities encountering discrimination of any kind need voices and bodies to stand beside them and cry for justice. In the words of the great Christmas hymn, “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” those who are “beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,” need us to lift their heads, hearts, and spirits to say to them, “O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.”

In the book of Esther, her uncle Mordecai said to her, “who knows if you are in this place for such a time as this?” God knows. God knows that we are in this place for this time, for God has planted us, and calls us to draw upon the waters of our baptisms, the waters of scripture and community, and then respond with generosity and love in whatever way we can, wherever we are, whatever we do.

To paraphrase Linus, “That’s what giving to the church is all about, Charlie Brown.” That’s what supporting the church with dollars and time is all about. God knows that we are in this place for this time, for God has planted us, and calls us to draw upon the waters of our baptisms, the waters of scripture and community, and then respond with generosity and love in whatever way we can, wherever we are, whatever we do, however God needs us, for today, and for tomorrows we may never see. Amen.