

Family Connections

Not too long ago, I was talking with some kids who worship at a church in our Conference. They were telling me what they like best about being part of a family. You can probably guess what was at the top of their list of favorite things that families do. It was “They feed you”!

But that wasn’t the only good thing they had to say about families. Here are some of the others: “They play with you.” “They spend time with you.” “They take you places.” “They tuck you in.” “They give you comfort.” “They care about you.” “They love you.”

Whether it’s the family you were born into or the family you started after you were grown, your family knows all about you. And loves you anyway! They know your strengths. They know your likes and dislikes. They know what makes you laugh and what makes you cry. They know your quirks and your idiosyncrasies. They know your hopes. And your dreams. And your fears.

In a family, there's familiarity born of longtime relationship. In a family, there's a closeness that's hard to find anywhere else. In a family there's intimacy. In a family, there's connectedness.

In this Sunday's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we get to listen in on a private conversation between two family members. Although Matthew doesn't say so, another gospel writer lets us know that Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins. They're family. They know each other well. John knows who Jesus is. And John feels unworthy even to carry Jesus' sandals. Much less *baptize* this one who is without sin.

So when Jesus comes to the Jordan and steps into the line of folks waiting to be baptized, John takes him aside. John doesn't stand on ceremony. He speaks plainly: *Now wait just a minute, Jesus. You want me to baptize you? No way! It's supposed to be the other way around.*

But Jesus tells him how it is: *It's okay, John. Let's just do it. The two of us. Because long, long ago, God made a plan. A saving plan. You baptizing me is part of that plan. It's all coming together now. It's right that we do it this way.*

And Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism into a wondrous moment. Sees the skies opening up. Sees God's dovelike Spirit coming down, resting on him. Hears from heaven a voice: *This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.*

At the baptism of Jesus, the One he calls Father claims him as family. When you're baptized, you too become part of a family—the family of your church.

They make promises when you're baptized. They promise to bathe you in prayer, to envelop you in forgiveness and love, that you may increase in faith and grow as a follower of Jesus Christ. You're connected. You belong. To your church family.

And this is true whether you're baptized as an adult or as a child. For the gospels testify that Jesus invites little children to come to him. And in our baptismal vows, we confess that Christ has opened the church to persons of *all* ages. And nations. And races.

In others words, the church is one family. Christians are a family. And United Methodist Christians are a part of that family. We're a connected family, the people called

Methodists. The Methodist movement was actually referred to as a Connexion by its founder, John Wesley.

On May twenty-fourth, seventeen thirty-eight, Mr. Wesley went to a meeting of the faithful on Aldersgate Street in London. In his journal, he recalled that in that place, his heart was strangely warmed. He received the assurance of forgiveness of his sins and of salvation. That experience was for Wesley an evening of epiphany. In the Christian year, this is a *season* of epiphanies.

Maybe *you* have experienced an epiphany like John Wesley's—a moment when the assurance that you are God's own was revealed to you. Or maybe such a time still lies ahead for you. Jesus himself heard this affirmation at his baptism, after his immersion in the cool, deep river.

Immersion and pouring and sprinkling are the three ways that United Methodists baptize. I've seen United Methodist youth baptized in the Atlantic Ocean! But no matter how or where or when it happens, baptism is a sign of God's steadfast love and a channel of God's grace.

Baptism is God's own gracious act. God is faithful, and God keeps God's promises made in the covenant of baptism. That's why we are baptized only once. Even though, in our human condition, *we* may not always have been faithful in keeping our baptismal promises. So we have both the need and the privilege of *reaffirming* our baptismal covenant and our vows—which we will do today, as a family.

You are in this family! You are baptized! Baptism leaves no outward, visible mark. But in baptism you are clothed in Christ Jesus.

You've probably seen photos taken at family reunions, photos in which family members—three or even four generations—all wear matching outfits. One friend shared a great photo of her extended family, all wearing identical blue shirts and khaki pants. They'd put on clothing that makes them easily identifiable as a family.

Likewise, in baptism, you put on something. You put on Christ like a garment. And putting on Christ identifies you as a member of his family. Jesus himself teaches that if you do God's will, then he—Jesus—is your brother.

And because this brother, this Jesus, is the Son of God—for so the Scriptures proclaim and so we believe—you are heirs with Christ! You have received a spirit of adoption. You are children of God! And this truth is witnessed to by God's own Spirit.

The Holy Spirit that anoints Jesus at his baptism. After this baptism in water and Spirit power, Jesus begins his ministry. Like this One we follow, you and I are baptized by water and Spirit. Baptized into ministry. Every baptized Christian is a minister!

To *minister* means to serve. At your baptism, you promised—or a promise was made *for* you—to serve Christ.

In today's Old Testament reading, Isaiah sings of God's servant. This is the very servant we, as Christians, understand to be Jesus Christ. You're baptized into the family of this One who serves. You're baptized into a family that serves. You're baptized into a family that cares for the bruised reeds and the dimly burning wicks of this world. For the oppressed and the dispossessed. For the hungry and the hurting. For the least and the last. You're baptized into a family that opens eyes that have

been blinded by the glitzy, glittering idols of a secular society. You're baptized into a family that releases prisoners who've sat in the darkness of isolation and hopelessness. You're baptized into a family that shares its hope and lets the light of Christ shine before others! You're baptized into a family that includes and welcomes and invites all to be a part.

You're baptized! You've got family connections! For you live in covenant relationship with the Holy One. And if you listen, in the silence, in the stillness, you may hear this One speaking to your heart. Saying, *I'm so very pleased with you. I take delight in you. I created you. I know all about you. And I love you. You are mine. My son. My daughter.*

Remember your baptism and be thankful. For God claims you as God's own. Your life is marked by God's love. God loves you beyond imagining. God loves you more than you will ever know. You are God's beloved child. You belong to the family of God.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.