

**“Baptism and the Internal Swagger”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
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Five or six years ago, it came to my attention that our little town of Crossville, Tennessee was running short on youth soccer coaches, and the question was asked of me, due to the fact that I had a child in the youth soccer program, would I be willing to coach. Well, I thought to myself, I did play soccer in high school, although that was 25 years earlier, and I hadn't touched a soccer ball since then, and I had never coached anything. I was intrigued by the idea but not really old enough to do it on my own, so I began to think. I remembered that a pastoral colleague of mine had a husband who was a referee in the youth soccer league. I knew him to some degree and I thought, you know (Steve his name was), Steve obviously knows the rules of soccer, and he was at an age where he wanted to get out of refereeing because it was too much running. Maybe Steve would be interested in coaching with me so, yes, I asked Steve. He was interested and thus began a seven-season coaching partnership that led to Daniel being the greatest soccer player on the earth!

Now, although our coaching careers ended up after seven seasons by winning our league, it did not start out that way. In fact, our first season, we were 0-9, and from the first practice it was rough! It was the first practice when I had this great idea that I would get the kids into a circle and I would get into the middle of the circle with one of the soccer balls, and I would toss it to each kid in the circle so that they could get used to heading the ball—a critical skill in soccer. Of course, most of these kids had never headed a soccer ball, but this drill didn't go too well. When I got around to Daniel, I tossed the ball and it hit Daniel smack dab in the nose. Immediately blood started flowing down his face and all over his shirt. As it flowed, all the other kids went “Ooh, gross!”. As I watched this unfold, I had one powerful thought. I thought, thank God it's my OWN kid! So, coaching soccer was a very humbling experience.

Of course, Steve and I learned along the way, and we did get better. One of the ways we learned was by watching and rubbing elbows with the other coaches. Some of them seemed to be instinctual about coaching. They were good and they knew it! One such coach went by the name of Coach Rusty, and Coach Rusty came with a reputation. He worked the kids hard, and he made them run. He was competitive to the core and, for Rusty, soccer was all about winning.

As I got to know him a little bit, I noticed that Rusty had a noticeable, yet subtle little swagger to his walk. He was confident and he showed it in the way he held himself. People who didn't like Rusty just said he was arrogant; nonetheless, when you encountered Rusty, you knew that he was in the room.

Part of our Christian faith and heritage is the idea that we, who follow in the footsteps of Christ, would be a people of profound humility. We are not to be haute or arrogant in our faith, so in the Sermon on the Mount, we are reminded by Jesus, no less, that those who are blessed are poor in spirit, those who are blessed are meek, and when those who are blessed pray, we are to go off alone to our rooms to pray in secret so that we are not seen by others, so humility has been part of our faith orientation from the “get-go”, and it's not a bad quality to have, but something has happened to our Christian humility in the last 100 years or so that is problematic.

As the church in America has declined in numbers and influence, as scandal has rocked the institutional church in all of its manifestations, as we have learned (and rightly so) about the history of Christian imperialism, and as other faith traditions have grown in strength and prominence around the world, these, and a variety of other historical currents, have left the Christian church, not simply humbled, but embarrassed and disempowered—disempowered to such an extent that in it lead editorial of November 13, the Christian Century Magazine, a mainstream Christian magazine, revealed that Christians are now the most persecuted and discriminated-against faith group in the

world.

According to the International Society for Human Rights, 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world are directed towards Christians and, on some level, as I read that figure, I think that perhaps our humility is killing us.

Now, Baptism of Christ Sunday is the one time a year when we remember the event of Jesus being baptized in The Jordan by John. In this remembrance, it is a time for us to remember our own baptisms and, today, to reaffirm and to recommit to what that baptism means for our lives, for our church, and for our world.

At the baptismal moment in the United Church of Christ, there are essentially four critical questions that are placed before us as we enter into the Christian faith through the baptismal waters, and these four critical questions can be summarized with the verbs renouncing, professing, following and growing, so we, in the United Church of Christ, ask those about to be baptized, “Do you renounce the powers of evil, do you profess Jesus as Lord and Savior, do you promise to follow in the way of Jesus, and do you promise to grow in the Christian faith?”. What is happening here in this series of questions is the calling of the baptized into an alternative community, into a counter-community that strives to live counter to the values of the world, a counter-community that has a mission in the world to show love and justice to all while resisting the darkness, violence and hatred that the world embraces.

The baptismal call is not easy and requires what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German Christian who resisted the evils of Nazi-ism, called our faith “the cost of discipleship”, and living a life of costly discipleship requires what my New Testament professor, Steve Patterson, calls “our foundational decision”—our foundational decision being our belief that Jesus was right about God. This is the foundational decision that we make as we make decisions about entering baptism, as we make decisions about entering into the Christian faith. Our foundational decision is the belief that Jesus is right about God. Now, this foundational decision is not about a Christian absolutism that somehow renders other faith traditions as illegitimate. That, in itself, would be a violation of the very essence of Jesus, but for those first Christians who encountered the empty tomb, they could proclaim resurrection because they, first of all, were convicted by Jesus when he was living. They were convicted by the spiritual life that he unleashed in them. So, what Patterson writes is to say that God raised Jesus from the dead and was to say that his kingdom was truly of God. To claim Jesus has risen is to make the claim that Jesus was right.

So, the question for us today is, can we preserve our humility while also making and living the claim that Jesus was right about God and, at the same time, can we embody the kind of psychological internal “swagger”, if you will, about our faith. That is a certainty in our decision to claim the way of Christ as our way. The New Testament scholar, Eugene Boring, writes this. He says “Jesus came as the forgiving, accepting, nonviolent, suffering, servant king, whose strength is precisely in his meekness.

“Meekness”, defined by the world (Webster’s, to be particular about it), is “quiet, gentle and easily imposed upon”. Is that our faith? Can we claim Jesus as the center point of our faith without presenting ourselves to the world as Christian doormats, as silly quaint little people of faith who can just be stepped upon? This is our challenge because our baptism calls us not to be doormats, not to be imposed upon, but our baptism in Christ calls us to be deeply engaged with the powers of darkness in this world, to be passionate and committed to God’s kingdom here on earth, and our baptismal vows call us into this new community where love defines the parameters of our behaviors, commitments and interactions with others.

I believe that the Christian faith that Jesus calls us to is not always a squishy sentimental kind of love, but is sometimes, in fact, a tough love—a love and a faith where our backs are straight and our commitments are sound, where we profess that, in Jesus Christ, we saw the essence of God and that

essence of God was love—love for all people, love for this world, love for creation, love for our neighbor.

So, today, as we remember the baptism of Jesus, let us also remember our own baptisms and recommit our lives to the one who came, not only to save us, but to save the world. That is the charge of the Christian church, to be about saving the world in the small ways that we can be about saving the world—in our communities, across the street, across the world, in our pews, reaching out with God's love, certain that God is with us. That is the call of baptism into this new community, so today we have the opportunity, not only to think about, and reflect upon our own baptisms, but to recommit our lives, to recommit to the vows of baptism and the new way of living that that is a part of. We are a church on a mission. Remembering our vows is a wonderful place to begin. Thanks be to God. Amen.