



January 4-5, 2020
Pastor Ellis White

Belonging through Baptism

1 Corinthians 12:13

Welcome to a new decade! And welcome to Chapel Hill! My name is Ellis White and I am the Pastor of Weekend Services. And you are joining us for a very special weekend in the life of our church. Every first weekend of the year, we take time to reflect back upon the past year at Chapel Hill, and upon God's faithfulness to us, and then step into the new year by renewing our commitment to Jesus by remembering our baptism.

Let's begin by looking back. First, perhaps with some sadness, we have celebrated the lives of 15 of our members who have gone to be with the Lord, including this weekend remembering and celebrating the life and resurrection of dear Tan Jenkins, our Early Childhood coordinator. In the last year we have also celebrated 63 new members of our church, men and women who have chosen to say, "I'm a part of what God is doing here at Chapel Hill." Also, in the last year we celebrated 47 baptisms, including three full-immersion baptism weekends. And perhaps most incredible of all, were the number of people who professed faith in Jesus for the first time. In 2019 we celebrated... 194 people making professions of faith in Jesus! We believe that is more people in a single year than we have ever had in Chapel Hill's history!

God is truly on the move at Chapel Hill in a quite remarkable way! In fact, in 2019 Chapel Hill was recognized by Outreach magazine as one of the 100 fastest growing churches in the US. We really believe God is doing something remarkable in our midst. In the fall we launched our For The City campaign, inviting us to love our neighbors, and 58 people hosted gatherings to demonstrate that love to their neighbors! And more is yet to come! In 2020 we are going to go Beyond These Walls like never before. As we eliminate our remaining debt we will be freed up to do another first in Chapel Hill history... launch our first ever church plant, Chapel Hill Port Orchard, with Pastor Megan Hackman leading the charge. You will be hearing more and more about this in coming weeks, but we are in the final stages of securing our ideal location and we are looking to launch our first service on Easter Sunday! We believe God is drawing many people to himself in this region of the US, and that we are called to be a part of his work.

Initiation

Today, we're going to give every single one of us sitting here an opportunity to commit to the Church of Jesus in 2020. An opportunity to say, "I'm in" on the work that God is doing in Gig Harbor and in Port Orchard and across the US, and across the world. An opportunity to make or renew a commitment that we belong, both us and our families, to this move of God through his church. And we're going to do it in the same way that Christians have done it for almost 2000 years, through baptism. Both through people being baptized for the first time, and through renewing our

baptismal vows and remembering when we, or our parents, first said of us that we were a part of this global movement called the Church.

I don't know if you ever joined a club or society when you were younger? Or whether you're thinking about doing it when you go to college? I remember joining the rugby team at my college. And one thing that was necessary for joining the team was called "initiation." It was a tradition that was passed down from one year of students to the next and it involved certain rites of passage that new students had to go through to be marked or identified as a member of the team. Going through initiation was a sign that you belonged to the team, it sealed that membership that you had already agreed to verbally.

Of course, rugby initiation was not the most pleasant experience I'd ever undergone, and being rugby, it involved alcohol. I was keen to participate but wanted to avoid having to consume the amount of alcohol that they required, so in order to take part in the initiation without violating my conscience, I asked if I could drink milk instead. Obviously, they were amenable to this suggestion, thinking how much funnier it was going to be to watch me try to keep milk down throughout all their games they had planned. And once it was complete, I was one of them. I belonged.

Belonging

Belonging is a beautiful thing. The desire to belong is built into every single one of us. Last weekend I watched the final Star Wars movie. The female lead, Rey, exhibits this desire to belong in a very clear way. Abandoned by her parents early in life, she is searching for her place in the universe: "Where do I belong? Who are my people?" Of course, I won't spoil it, but I was incredibly moved when she finally found the answer to that question.

The Church is a place you can belong. In my life, especially living so far from my family and my home country, the Church has become that place for me. It has become the place where I belong. And I don't mean the physical building. I mean the people. The Church has become my family—my brothers and sisters, my parents, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles. Many times I have reflected upon the passage where Jesus says to his followers,

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands." (Mark 10:29–30 ESV)

The Church is the place where I belong. Where I am known and understood. Where I am loved and accepted for who I am, not for what I do. And I believe every single one of us has a desire to belong to a community like that.

Of course, belonging to a community like that doesn't just happen. It requires something of us. Just like belonging to my rugby team required something of me, belonging to the church requires something of each of us. It requires a commitment, and an ongoing discipline of humility, love,

patience, kindness, service, and a whole host of other virtues. And it all begins with one act. A rite of passage. An initiation. Baptism.

Belonging through Baptism

Baptism is the sign that marks out the reality that we belong. Baptism is the seal that tells the world: you are a part of something bigger than yourself. The early church leader, Paul, wrote to one of the churches he planted, in a city called Corinth:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13 ESV)

Paul is using an image here to help us understand a greater reality. The image is that of the human body. Paul writes that just as there are many different parts to the body—hands, feet, knees, elbows—there is still only one body. In the same way, he says, although you all come from different places—Jews, Gentiles, slave and free... although today we might say black or white, rich or poor—although you all come from different places, you are all a part of this one body—the Church. And Paul explains how we all came to be part of body of Christ—through baptism. Here’s how one translator puts it:

“By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.)” (1 Corinthians 12:13 MESSAGE)

Baptism is the act that proclaims we are no longer independent, that we are no longer a lone ranger, but we are a part of something bigger than ourselves, something more integrated, something as intricately connected as a human body, and something in which we have all given up our control to one person: the head of the body, Jesus Christ. Baptism is the sign that marks out the reality that you belong to Jesus and to his body, the Church. Baptism is the seal that tells the world: you are a part of something bigger than yourself. Baptism is the initiation of the Church.

Initiation in the Bible

But for the early Christians, in particular, the Jewish Christians who were reading this, they were very familiar with another initiation rite. An initiation ceremony that was performed on every male Jewish child aged 8 days old: circumcision. Circumcision was the way that the Jewish people had been instructed by God to demonstrate who was in and who was out of their community. It was their initiation.

As the church grew in its early years, it was predominantly Jewish, and as Gentiles began to join the church, the arguments arose consistently about whether they needed to be circumcised. Circumcision was the initiation ceremony for those who wanted to be a part of God’s people, so

surely these Gentiles who were deciding to subject themselves to the Jewish Messiah would have to be circumcised, right? Every group of people needs an initiation and since they were all following this Jewish Messiah, shouldn't it have been circumcision?

But the early church leaders decided against it. They met together in Jerusalem, we find it recorded in Acts 15, and they determined that circumcision was not required for people to join this new movement of Jesus followers. Instead, the initiation ceremony for the Church would be the one that Jesus himself had instituted. An initiation ceremony that doesn't preclude women, like circumcision did; an initiation that was necessary both for Gentiles and for Jews; an initiation that could be performed anywhere there was water, like the Ethiopian eunuch pointed out—good thing he didn't have to be circumcised! The initiation ceremony, the rite of passage instituted by the early church to mark out those who were a part of the Church, a part of the body of Christ, was baptism.

Remembering our Baptism

Baptism is itself a sign of a greater reality, that not only do we belong to the church, but that through our incorporation into the body of Christ, we receive the benefits of God's promises to his people. That just as Christ was buried in the grave, so our old sinful self was buried in the water through baptism. That as Christ was raised to new life, so we are raised to new life as we come up out of the water. As the water of baptism cleanses our skin, so we find the blood of Christ cleansing our souls. And as Noah and his family were saved through water, so we are saved too by the waters of baptism. Baptism is the means through which God shows his saving grace to us, his Church.

If you have been baptized you belong to this visible community of the Church. Some of you were baptized as babies, like me. Some of you were baptized when you professed faith yourself as a child or an adult. But if you are a part of the visible Church, you've been baptized. And this weekend we are each of us, going to remember that baptism. We are going to remember the vows that we took, or were taken on behalf by our parents, and remember that at one point in our life, we became a part of something larger than ourselves... we became a part of the saved, reborn and forgiven body of Christ—the Church—through whom God is bringing hope to the world.

And this weekend, if you have been baptized, we're going to invite you to come forward in a few moments and one of your pastors will renew that baptism for you, by marking your forehead with water in the sign of the cross. As you do, I want to invite you to take the opportunity to not only remember your baptism, but to remember what it means: that you belong. You are a part of the Church. You are a member of the body of Christ. You are a part of a community of people that God is using in this world. And if Chapel Hill is your home church, you are a part of a community where God has been at work in this last year drawing 194 people to himself! And you are a part of a community that is about to have a baby in 2020, as we plant our first church. You belong to something bigger than yourself; something with meaning and purpose. So, as the pastor marks your forehead with water, they will say, "you belong," and if you believe it, I want you to say, "I belong."

Invitation to Baptism

But I also know there are people here this weekend who haven't ever gone through that initiation into belonging to the body of Christ. There are children here whose parents have already indicated that they want to bring their child forward for baptism, to mark them with the sign and the seal that they belong to this family—the Church. And perhaps there are other parents here, who today want to do that for your children. If that's you, then as people come forward to remember their baptism, I'd like to invite you to bring your child to the side of the auditorium, getting them from childcare if you need to, and speak with one of our elders. Let them know that you desire to have your child baptized today and they will ask you a few questions before bringing you forward to do that before the end of the service.

And I know there are also adults here who have not been baptized and you've indicated that today is the day you want to mark yourself out as part of this community—the Church. And perhaps there are others of you who haven't yet said you want to do that, but you are sensing that today is the day, and now is the time to say, "Yes, I belong." If that is you, we would love you to come to the sides of the auditorium and meet with an elder. They will ask you a few questions to make sure you understand what you're committing to and then bring you forward before we finish our service to be baptized. Don't worry, you don't have to go in the big hot tub, baptism is just as effective through sprinkling water on your head, but if you do want to get in, we have towels and a t shirt for you.

So, in a moment I'm going to pray. After I've prayed, if you've been baptized already, please come forward row by row from the left side of your pew and remember your baptism with a pastor. And if you or your children haven't been baptized and you'd like to, please come to the sides after this prayer to meet with an elder, and we'll walk you through the steps to get baptized today. If you've already indicated you want to be baptized, hang tight for this song and then come to the front where everyone getting baptized will be gathering.

Let's pray.