

**United Church of Fayetteville
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TRUSTING A FRAGILE NET (Ephesians 3:14-4:6)

Today is often an occasion for celebrating baptisms. Without any scheduled, I thought it might be an apt day to do some teaching about baptism. Now, books have been written and have attempted to answer many questions, with more or less effectiveness. A sermon isn't a book, doesn't go on at length and can't be referred back to, so... Therefore, today we are going to focus on one particular aspect of baptism – and that is why as Baptists and Presbyterians, in a largely ecumenical setting, we celebrate baptism among members of the community, in community, rather than as a private act.

In our congregation, we have the best of both worlds, practicing both infant and believer's baptism –each one emphasizing a key element of the understanding of the sacrament. Infant baptism reminds us that faith is a gift of God's grace, not a matter of human merit. Believer's baptism reminds us that grace evokes, or ought to evoke, human response to the claim that grace makes upon us.

Engaging in the sacrament in a public worship service highlights some of what we believe and don't believe about what happens through baptism. Whether infants or children, teens or adults, we understand that baptism is a response - a public affirmation of faith and an expression of a desire to grow in that faith.

Baptism is sign and seal of a relationship with God in Christ, and with the community of Christ, and a mark in the journey of life and faith. It is that understanding of a commitment to a journey of faith, whether by parents and congregation on behalf of an infant, or on the occasion of believer's baptism, that is central to our baptizing in community and asking that the one baptized be part or become part of our life together. We do not teach that there is need for something called an "emergency baptism," for we would never have the arrogance to suggest that any person is within or outside the circle of God's love and care, based on or limited by human activity – that anyone's salvation is anything other than the will of God. Therefore, we only encourage growth and withhold nothing, when asking people to be part of the community when they or a loved one are to be baptized.

The best way I can describe the nature of that relationship is with a story of my experience with a friend in Michigan. In that church, I led the confirmation-commissioning process each year. We typically had anywhere from 7-15 teens participating. One year, despite the fact that there were 14 or 15 potential youth in the class, only two signed up. After many follow-up phone calls with youth and parents, and lengthy discussion, the pastors and educator decided that we needed to wait until the following year to blend two classes together. With regret, I wrote to the two teens and their parents. One parent, my friend Joyce, called me. She had put a good deal of effort into persuading her youngest daughter to try the class, fluttering around this last fledgling in the nest, encouraging her with the understanding that she just needed

to try it. Having persuaded her daughter, she wasn't sure she could keep up the flutter for another year. I explained to Joyce that our decision was based on the belief that the confirmation-commissioning process was about more than acquiring information, but about entering a covenantal community – an experience to have, not a report to write. We just didn't feel we could create the experience with only two students. She asked if I would call the other parents. I already had. Mostly, their decision was based on the convenience (or lack thereof) of being in church regularly for that a seven to ten week period of time. Joyce asked, "May I call them?"

"Certainly."

"What's your critical mass?"

"Five."

"So if I get three?"

"We'll have the class."

She got eight. I asked her what she said. Not only was she able to say something a pastor could not, what she said was inspired. "I called and said, 'When my daughter was baptized, you promised...'"

Fifteen years later, a word on the wind was called back to life; a promise was renewed; around almost forgotten words, a covenant community – a community based on promise – was reformed for the sake of it being formed again in a new generation.

"When my daughter was baptized, you promised..." You promised. I promised. They promised. We promise. Again and again, over the years, we gather in this room or ones like it, to give and receive promises. Welcomed with baptism, received into membership, pledged in marriage, we promise to show love, to follow Christ, to support, to pray, to share all that we are and have, to nurture, to encourage, to teach, to praise, to love, to have no other. Our life together echoes with, "I do." "We will." "I promise." Forever and ever. Amen.

Powered by love, by passion, by faith, by protectiveness, by duty, by need, by honor, by gift, by hope, by commitment, we burst forth in a flurry of activity keeping those promises. We bring children to church and meals to the hungry; we build houses and draw plans for the future; we buy a home and frame a life, we teach, we trust, we forgive, we give generously; we make the right choices at work; we want only the one who wants us; we look with compassion on those who have fallen short and we look to the future with hope. Day by day, our life together echoes with, "I do." "We will." "I promise." Forever and ever. Amen.

Day by day, priorities change. Options expand. Choices increase. Challenges mount. Energy wanes. Temptations arise. Hearts break. Disease comes. Bitterness grows. Death arrives. Hope departs. Day by day, promises are broken. We do not often say it aloud, but no matter who we are, we are not merely the victims of violated pledges – we break them ourselves. We utter harsh words we wish we could take back. We withhold trust we could have given. We hoard affirmation for fear there won't be any left for us. We get ahead at work. We neglect ones at home. We want revenge instead of reconciliation. Our feelings get hurt. We get bored ... angry... lazy... frustrated... tired... discouraged. And we blow it. In those moments, we are not the parents, the children, the lovers, the spouses, the colleagues, the church members, the friends, the citizens, the people, we promised and we sincerely hope to be. Sometimes, we point to

others rather than look at ourselves. Sometimes it's easier to forget promises than bear up under the guilt of not keeping them perfectly. On our best days and on our worst, somewhere among us: someone is getting it mostly right; most of us are getting it least partly right; and some of us feel as though we are getting it all wrong. Nonetheless, even in this, day by day, our life together echoes with, "I do." "We will." "I promise." Forever and ever. Amen.

So it is that with all good intentions, we make and receive promises again and again; with all of the faithfulness and hopefulness of which we are capable. And, here we are, those of us who have seen it all, heard it all, have said it before ourselves, have kept and broken our own promises, accept new promises with open-hearted trust and hope that this time it will be different. In the moments when these promises, are given and received, whether they be promises of baptism, or membership, those of the ones we elect officers, promises in marriage or even the vows I heard made and renewed at yesterday's Eagle Award Court, we become a family again – bound together, not by constitution or by-laws, procedure or process, but by an exchange of promises weaving our lives together in the way nothing else will or can.

How can we do it? Knowing what we know about ourselves and others, how can we do it? How can we continue to gather in this room and rooms like it, giving and receiving promises, trusting a fragile net of words on the wind to hold us together, to hold us up, to make us whole? How can we do it?

In the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More's daughter begs him to save his life by renegeing on a vow he made. He answers her, "Ah, Meg, when a man takes an oath he hold his own self in his hands, like water, and when he opens his hands he need not hope to find himself again." Brilliant theater. Admirable commitment. Bad theology.

In this room and ones just like it, we come together to celebrate baptisms, not for photo ops and admiring babies, but to remind ourselves of our own baptisms. To remember that if we hold anything at all in our hands it is the waters of our own baptism poured out by God. Even as those waters slip through our fingers in dribbles or trickles or even gushing floods, the hope and promise of our faith is that we might always find ourselves again in the One who never loses us. We come together holding out our cupped hands to catch the restoring healing waters of baptism. We come together to be found by God who is always reshaping us, reforming us and restoring us into the children of blessing and children of promise God has already named and called each one of us to be. Forever and ever. Amen.

"I do." "We will." "I promise." Forever and ever. Amen. How can we do it? How can we trust our children, our lives, our loves, our selves to the fragile net of words on the wind? We come together in this room or ones like it to remember that we are a family bound not by blood, but by the blood of Christ. We come together to remember that our promises rest not on our own ability or commitment or even desire to keep them; they rest on the eternal promises of God. We come together to remember that our words – whether they are to us like dust on our tongues or the very air in our lungs – our words are borne on the wind of the Spirit of God, which has the power to give them life and breath and heart, this day and on any day to come.

"I do." "We will." "I promise." Forever and ever. Amen.

How can we do it?

How can we do anything else?

Forever and ever. Amen.

