

## **Remember Who You Are**

**Rev. Sarah Campbell**

**Symbol: Baptism Font**

**Scripture: Mark 1:9-11 and Acts 8:26-39**

Are there places or things that remind you of who you really are?

When we hit the gravel road, heading into the cabin, the feel of it and the sound of it, the gravel, makes me feel closer to my parents. And then a mile in when I see the old, rugged driveway sign that says Henry and Ruth Campbell I feel myself a Campbell deep down and it feels good. And this Campbell identity is somehow inexplicably and intrinsically connected to the Northwoods and to the Lake.

When I drive by my college way over in St. Paul on the way to or from an errand, again, deep down I feel it. That it's me. It's more than loyalty, or maybe it's the deepest kind of loyalty, it's gratitude, and a knowing that it was just the right place for me at the right time in my life, though at times deeply painful, and it shaped how I continue to see and act in the world.

And now, when I drive through George Floyd Square six days a week on my way home from work, I remember who I am as a privileged person, with an ancestry, though beloved, that also includes questionable if not sordid history, and that I have penitential political and soul work to do until I die. I've an unflinching spiritual practice: With few exceptions, and I don't know how this started... my body did it to me... no matter how preoccupied I am with work or the news on the radio, a kind of genuflection, at the entrance, but with a fist... I raise my left arm as a power resistance fist and keep it up until I exit on the other side. *And* I bring two thoughts to mind, of *his* beautiful face and of the entire world being changed because his life was snuffed out.

Wondering about places or things that remind us of who we really are....

And then there's this... when I am in another church, mostly abroad, there is almost always a baptismal font with water in a prominent place, usually at the entrance, and I always, before departing and going back out into the world, dip my fingers in the water, and bless myself with the cross, like at baptism, and say to myself inwardly these words: "Remember who you are." Again, I don't know when or how this started, but it's important to me. Not an empty ritual at all, but a simple, bodily motion that reminds me that I'm a Christian, I'm a beloved child of God, I'm on the Jesus path. It's a kind of plumb line into my true self, my deepest self, before I go back into the world of distractions, ego needs, capitalism's desire to form my attention and loyalty. God knows it's not fool proof or 100% effective. I can still mutter curses to the driver who darts out in front of me just minutes later... But it's a potent reminder to me that day of who I am.

If only we had more space in our “cozy” narthex, entryway, for our baptismal font! As we depart we could touch the water to our forehead, with a baptismal motion that says: “remember who you are”....

We have two sacraments in our faith--- communion and baptism. And both involve elements from the earth—bread and grapes, water and a clay pot to hold it... and our bodies, movement, touch... It’s not cerebral, nor just about the vocal cords. This movement and elements of the earth, these rituals, symbolize truth too deep for human language. Sorry poets, you can’t even capture this. When the great choreographer Martha Graham was asked about what a dance means she responded: “Honey, if I could tell you I wouldn’t have had to dance it.”

The Great Vigil of Easter, which we celebrated at Mayflower for years, before Covid and will celebrate again now, is perhaps the greatest dance of our faith. Loaded with meaning. If someone were a complete stranger to Christianity and wanted to know it, the best introduction might be to experience this service and then to talk about it with someone after. It’s an ancient liturgy of the church, rich in symbolism and dramatic in form that happens anytime after sunset on Holy Saturday and before sunrise on Easter Sunday. It includes fire, water, bread, and movement, and song and the essential stories of our faith. It includes both communion and baptism. Babies are often baptized at this powerful service and after this baptism ritual, confirmands take branches and dip them in the baptismal water and walk throughout the congregation and sprinkle the water drops on everyone. (People from other faiths are told of this beforehand so they can step out, if they wish, honoring the truth of this ritual for us... ) As the water is felt on the skin, this ritual speaks, “Remember who you are.... A beloved child of God. I will never abandon you.....You belong to this community. You were not created to be lonely in this life, but to live in community. ... We are on the Jesus path together... This is our path through this good but hard life. It’s a wonderful path of forgiveness, and joy, and generosity, and justice... ... and on your death bed you will know fulfillment.”

That’s too many words, isn’t it? No when the water touches your skin may this simple phrase comes to mind... “remember who you are” ...

A little more about our baptism font. Simple design, just wood. And this earthen vessel. I wonder where the clay came from... The pot was shaped in the hands of Christian Blanck, the son of Dana, a saint of this church.

This summer series is prompting a lot of reflection about the symbols around us. Now we are fortunate to have a sanctuary of movable pieces. You know the organ could even float over there if it wanted to. But sometimes the sacred objects get pushed to the side and forgotten. Let us keep the baptismal font more front and center, like in front of the organ, and always have water in it. Perhaps from the creek? Feel free to come forward during hymns, or during communion, or the prelude or postlude and dip your fingers in and anoint yourself.... saying inwardly “remember who you are”.

One of our Bible stories today is about the Ethiopian Eunuch, an educated, well-traveled person, I wish we had their name!, who is asking the best questions and listening to Phillip talk about this new religion and the founder, a messenger of God, Jesus. Listening intently they were, no doubt hearing the story of Jesus baptism-- the archetypal Christian story of God’s love for every single human being; the universe saying You are my beloved, you are mine and I will never abandon you... Yes, hearing that story from Phillip and other stories about the Jesus path. About how we can choose how to live even when those in power try to lead us down a different path, sometimes even punishing us for choosing the Jesus path. And they, the Eunuch, heard stories of how this person Jesus was so God infused that not only did he ignore the dominant cultural map, who belongs where, it just didn’t stick to him, as if he existed in a different reality, and so he welcomed everyone to the community, to the table, and the table was round and everyone served everyone. Well! The Eunuch had never heard that such a life was possible! And with goosebumps all over their body they said: “How about me? What’s to prevent me from being baptized?” Phillip responded: “Come on. Let’s get you baptized.” And this gender non conforming human being, always kind of an outsider, heard another message from God that day, as well. They heard: You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased. AND BE WHO YOU ARE. Be your authentic self. I love you as you are. You are beloved. You are mine. AND the early Christian community welcomed them saying: “Yes, you are ours”. 1

So on baptism day we hold the baby up to the universe and hear God’s words to this child: “You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased.” Then we promise to care for this child and to raise them on the Jesus path. We carry the baby through the congregation, singing Child of Wonder, and knowing this child is ours, not just the parent’s or the god parent’s, but ours! We can’t keep carrying the baby and walking just then, for the service continues, but we might point to the CE wing and say “that is the school of the heart where we will collectively shape you on the Jesus path”. And then point to the columbarium and say “we are on this path until death...”

This ceramic vessel is carried to the chapel on Ash Wednesday. And instead of water, it holds ashes. These ashes will be placed on our foreheads, with the same gesture as at baptism, a cross and these words spoken:

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Oh Our beautiful religion! How it offers us community and wisdom for a lifetime!

Now this is when the sermon should end. It really should. As a preacher I should know this. But I just can't. This symbol is so powerful... Will you stay with me? Will you?

Young adults, you in your 20, 30s, early 40s, shaping a life, maybe with a partner, maybe not.... you who have no children... when you look at the baptismal font, what do you wonder? I know some of you choose not to have your own children for all sorts of good reasons. Every blessing on that decision! But if you are choosing not to have children because of the earth's rising temperatures, let's talk about that... today and in the future...

I've been carrying an article from the New York Times for a long time now in my purse, I guess that means close to my heart... Kind of accidentally put it in there but I haven't removed it.

It's entitled: Is it wrong to bring a child into our warming world?

A young couple, Generation z, privileged with good education and good salaries, writes to New York's preeminent ethicist: Kwame Anthony Appiah about How they've always wanted a child or two, knew it when they married, but now as the earth warms, they wonder: is it selfish to have children knowing full well that the child will have to deal with a lower quality of life thanks to the climate crisis and its many cascading effects, like increased natural disasters, food shortages, greater societal inequity and unrest?

The philosopher lays out his argument step by step about population growth and also how if everyone stopped having babies the effect would be not to help humanity but to end it. And how children who are raised with a sense of responsibility, as theirs would surely be, could be a part of the solution, in personal and collective ways, ensuring survival on a livable planet by promoting adaptation, resilience, and mitigation. And he concludes: "Probably the key question to ask is whether you can give your offspring a good prospect of a decent life. The climate crisis figures here not because your children will contribute to it but because they may suffer from it. It sounds as if you've already made the judgement that your kid would be all right, supplied with the necessary resources. That is, as you recognize, a privilege in our world But the right response is not to reduce the number of children who have that privilege but to work together toward a situation in which every other child on the planet does, too! This philosopher is giving them a green light.

Young adults... A lot here to think about ... I'll tape the article on my door now and footnote it in my sermon manuscript so you can read it if you wish.

And when we, who are older, we boomers, when we look at the baptismal font, let us remember the promises we make to the children. We promise to resist evil, and that includes doom. (We have everything we need to shift to clean energy and though the earth is ill it's not in hospice yet...) Might we add another baptismal promise, something like "We love you more than you can ever imagine and we promise, we promise, we promise that will do everything within our power to save this mother earth and her waters for you and your children and your children's children."

Who knew a ceramic vessel filled with water could hold such powerful meaning?!!

### Sources

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Appiah, Kwame Anthony, "Is It Wrong to Bring a Child Into Our Warming World?", New York Times Magazine, 6-11-23.

By [Kwame Anthony Appiah](#)

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*I have always loved babies and children. I babysat throughout high school and college, and do so even now as a full-time engineer. My fiancé was drawn to me because of how much he appreciated my talent with and love for children. We have many little nieces, nephews and cousins whom we love but don't get to see often. We also have always been clear with each other that we would try to have biological children soon after getting married.*

*That being said, my fiancé and I, who are both Generation Z, care deeply about the planet and painfully watch as scientists predict that the earth will reach 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming by the 2030s. Is it selfish to have children knowing full well that they will have to deal with a lower quality of life thanks to the climate crisis and its many cascading effects, like increased natural disasters, food shortages, greater societal inequity and unrest?*

*We realize that a child's very existence adds to our carbon footprint, but as parents we would do our best to foster an environmentally friendly household and try to teach our children how to navigate life sustainably. My fiancé says that because we are privileged as two working engineers in the United States, we can provide enough financial support to keep our children from feeling the brunt of the damage from climate change. Is it OK to use this privilege?*

— April

## From the Ethicist:

Here are two questions that we often ask about an action. First, what difference would it make? Second, what would happen if everyone did it? Both raise important considerations, but they can point in opposite directions. The first question asks us to assess the specific consequences of an act. The second question asks us (as Kant would say) to “universalize the maxim” — to determine whether the rule guiding your action is one that everyone should follow. (I won’t get into the philosophers’ debates about how these maxims are to be specified.) Suppose someone pockets a ChapStick from Walgreens and asks: What difference does it make? One answer is that if everyone were to shoplift at their pleasure, the retail system would break down.

There’s no such clash in answering those questions when it comes to your having at least one child. The marginal effect of adding a few humans to a planet of about eight billion people is negligible. ([A recent paper](#), by a group of environmental and economic researchers, projects that by the end of the century, the world population could be smaller than it is today — though that’s just one model.) And if everybody stopped having babies, the effect would be not to help humanity but to end it.

I’m not one of those people who will encourage you to imagine you’ll give birth to a child who devises a solution to the climate crisis. (What are the odds?) Still, it’s realistic to think that children who are raised with a sense of responsibility could — in personal and collective ways — be part of the solution, ensuring human survival on a livable planet by promoting adaptation, resilience and mitigation.

Probably the key question to ask is whether you can give your offspring a good prospect of a decent life. The climate crisis figures here not because your children will contribute to it but because they may suffer from it. It sounds as if you’ve already made the judgment that your kids would be all right, supplied with the necessary resources. That is, as you recognize, a privilege in our world. But the right response is not to reduce the number of children who have that privilege but to work — together — toward a situation in which every other child on the planet does, too.



