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"Repent!" Turn away from the sins that are consuming and destroying you. Turn away from the evils that threaten your soul and spirit. Turn away from the lies, from the grudges and the prejudices that make you see others as less than a brother or sister to you. Turn away from the lures of lust for flesh, lust for money, lust for prestige. Turn away from the desire to control what others feel or think or do. ... Shall I go on? ... *"Repent!"*

That's what Peter's first sermon proclaims. At least it is the first sermon by Peter recorded for us. It is the first sermon fully powered by the Holy Spirit. It is given on the day of Pentecost after the promised Spirit of God has come upon the disciples, sending them out to do the work of Jesus because Jesus has been crucified and resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the heavenly Father. Now *they* must declare the Word of God: *"Repent! And be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call"* (vss. 38-39).

Are you among those whom the Lord is calling? Are you still working at this bottom-line-command from the Lord: Repent and be baptized!

This is not merely a process of turning away from sin and shame and fear and doubt – it is also a process of turning *toward* the Way of Christ, to immerse ourselves into the spirit of forgiveness, of redeeming grace, of resurrecting power – not just to receive forgiveness and new life for ourselves, but also to learn to offer forgiveness and new life to all of the people God has created to live around us. Repent: turn away from sin, turn toward the Lord ... and be baptized, fully immersed into the Way of love, of hope, of faith, of peace. Receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit – let it become the spirit of your life, your way of living.

As the old Shaker hymn says: *"To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning, we come round right."*

The message of repentance and baptism into a new and right spirit has been at the heart of Christian preaching from the very beginning. It was the message of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for Jesus, and it was the message of Jesus, after he was baptized by John and after he was tempted in the Wilderness. Matthew 4:17, *"Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" Interesting. John said, repent from your evil ways and come into the water by your own choice so that you can get your sins washed away before the day of judgment arrives. Jesus said, repent because the kingdom of heaven is very close – the power and glory of God is going to come and surround you, so be ready. For Jesus, the way to get ready is to follow him and to help others follow him. Matthew 4:19, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."*

This is the third sermon in a series on the basic beliefs and practices of the church. We've talked about counting the cost of truly, fully following Jesus instead of living like the rest of the world. We've talked about gathering around the Word of God which was made flesh in Jesus. The message of forgiveness, redeeming grace, and resurrecting power that was visibly at work through Jesus is now to become visibly at work through us. And we received communion as a sign that we are willing to let God's Word be made flesh in us, as it was in Jesus.

Today we pay attention to how this redeeming grace and resurrecting power is expressed in baptism. All Christian traditions teach about baptism in some form. Our Quaker brothers and sisters don't use water. As I understand it, they believe that the important baptism is the baptism of the spirit. The rest of us use water, because the early Christians used water. And Brethren and some others want to follow scripture even more closely – so we go down *into* the water, as the Bible says the first Christians did. We don't just sprinkle or pour, we immerse. We dunk. (That's why early Brethren were called "Dunkers.") We know that the Greek word *baptizo* means "immerse," so we submerge the whole body under the water, to wash every part of ourselves clean and to consecrate every part of ourselves to the Way of the Lord.

And we do it *when we are ready to do it* – when we are able to know what it means – when we have reached the stage of knowing that we need to repent, need to turn away from sin and live a new life. That's why we call it "*Believer's baptism*." It is the public testimony of an individual's own personal *believing*. Mark's Gospel records Jesus' final words to his disciples, just before Jesus was taken up to heaven (Mark 16:15-16), "*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*" The importance of believing is underscored! And clearly, baptism is to take place after becoming a believer.

Matthew's record of that same teaching of Jesus is more familiar to us (Matthew 28:19-20 – we call it the Great Commission, given just before the Risen Lord Jesus ascended to the Father): "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" It is clear that we make disciples ... we help people make a commitment to follow Jesus ... *first*. Then we baptize them – we immerse them to fully identify with the Father/Creator and with the Son/Savior and with the Holy Spirit, so that we keep on learning "*to obey everything*" Jesus has commanded. We *don't wait* until we know everything. Indeed, we cannot master everything before we are baptized. That comes gradually, step by step as we grow in the Spirit, as the Word of God grows in us. But we *do wait* until we are "disciples" – until we are able to make *the initial commitment* to quit following the world and to start following Jesus.

Are *you* following Jesus? Do you hear his call to *repent*, i.e., to turn away from sin and half-heartedness, and to fully turn to whole-heartedly walk in his Way?

The title of our membership preparation book is "*To Follow in Jesus' Steps*." That is our goal. That is our purpose. And to follow in Jesus' steps requires that we *not* walk in the ways of the world. That is very hard to do. It is not something that magically happens when we get baptized. It is something we must keep on working at for as long as we live ... always still learning "*to obey everything*" Jesus has commanded us. We learn to trust that Jesus will indeed be with us always, all the way to the close of the age, no matter what, and that he will keep on pulling us back from the precipices like a shepherd yanks his wandering sheep back into the flock. *Our task is to keep on repenting*, turning away time and time again from the sins that cling so closely. If we are hell-bent on doing whatever we want to do, we turn a blind eye to the Lord who wants to save us from our sins. But if we repent and immerse ourselves afresh in the forgiveness and life-giving power of the Lord, we will head towards the Kingdom of heaven.

1 John 1:8-9 declares this truth, "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" We need the cleansing of his forgiveness. Choosing to be baptized is a recognition that we *are deciding to let the Lord forgive us*. We must

deliberately die to the old self and humble ourselves in submission to allow the Lord to give birth to a new, eternal, spiritual self that is God's new creation. And then we grow up, like a little child learning all that is required to live in this world, so we must choose to keep on learning all that is required to live in the world that is to come. Or better said: we choose to be open to all that *the Lord* wants to teach us, to shape in us, to prepare us by his power and grace to become ready for the Life he wants us to live – both in this world and in the world that is to come. We must first *believe*. But we do not create our spiritual life – we simply open ourselves to receive God's gift of Life in the Spirit.

Baptism takes many forms. Many churches baptize infants – perhaps some of you were baptized as infants. That is the practice of Catholic, Episcopal, UCC, Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and many other churches. The Orthodox baptize infants, too, although they dunk them instead of sprinkling or pouring – and I have seen immersion of infants in a Catholic church as well. To their credit – or perhaps as a result of the witness of believer's baptism churches like ours, those traditions require a confirmation – the person must confirm their baptism as valid for themselves before it is fully completed. Very similar, I think, to our understanding that a person must be a believer to be properly baptized.

Some traditions use very little water. I remember when my sister called me and said that the Presbyterian Church they were attending (since there were no Brethren congregations near where they lived) had just done a baby dedication, so they were thinking of having their child dedicated there. I asked, "are you sure it wasn't a baptism? It would be very unusual for a Presbyterian Church to do a baby dedication the way we do." Our baby dedication services are modeled after Jesus' dedication in the temple (although we don't do the circumcision at church that Jesus would have had done at the Temple). My sister went to get the bulletin. "Well, well," she said, "it does say baptism. But I didn't see any water." "They don't need much water," I said. "Just a little sprinkle."

For believer's church traditions (Brethren, Baptists, Mennonites, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, other Pentecostals and many others), the water is much more visible, much more important. In fact, some early Brethren believed that if the water wasn't flowing like the rivers of New Testament baptisms, the baptism hadn't taken place properly. I don't know whether sins had to wash downstream or what. But usually baptisms took place in a creek. The Eder River of Germany was the first location in 1708. The first baptisms in America were in the Wissahickon Creek near Germantown (now part of Philadelphia) – on December 25 (Christmas Day), 1723, fifteen years after the first baptisms and 52½ years before the Declaration of Independence changed us from a colony into a state. We've been here a long time! And we have been known for our baptisms – we were called the German Baptist Brethren or simply the German Baptists – until 1908 when our name was changed to the Church of the Brethren.

For those first baptisms in the Wissahickon Creek on Christmas Day 1723, Brethren had to break the ice in order to baptize. There are some folks among us who were baptized in the midst of winter into this congregation [Myra and Wilmer, Elmer?, others? – raise hands]. I conjecture that it had to do with people being busy with crops during spring and summer and fall, so getting everybody out to revival meetings probably needed to wait until the winter time. Plus, when you are baptized in the cold of winter, it's a whole lot more memorable!

Baptism is a crucial event. It should be memorable. It is the time when we declare our decision to repent of all sin ... making a commitment that throughout our lives, we will willingly turn away from sin and seek, again and again and again, to live according to the example and teaching of Jesus.

Actually, our baptismal vows ask first whether we believe Jesus has the power to help us do this repenting. We ask: “*Do you believe that Jesus is God’s Son and has brought from heaven a saving gospel, and do you receive and trust Jesus as your Savior and your Lord?*” In other words, do you believe it is possible to be saved from sin? You must be a believer to receive believer’s baptism.

Then: *Will you turn away from all sin and will you endeavor by God’s grace to live according to the example and teachings of Jesus?* Will you repent? Will you turn away from all that messes life up and turn instead to the Life-giving Lord?

If so, you are more than welcome to be fully a part of the work of the church – to join the rest of us in working on obeying all that Christ has commanded us. So the third vow of baptism is: “*Will you be loyal to the church, upholding the church by your prayers and your presence, your substance and your service?*” Are you living out this vow? Are you *praying* for the church? Are you making yourself *present* to do your part in the work of the church, dedicating the very *substance* of who you are to this work and, more than that, providing *service* – being helpful even when it might not be your strongest giftedness to change light bulbs or to visit the sick or to warn the wayward.

It takes lots of believing to be a truly baptized Christian, fully immersed into the presence and the power of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That’s why when someone transfers into our congregation, having been baptized already, perhaps as an infant, we simply ask them to publicly accept our vows. We used to require that everyone be baptized our way – with full bodily trine immersion. Some other churches still require that everyone be baptized their way in order to transfer into their tradition. But we now, as a result of our cooperation with other Christian churches around the world, accept people as they come from other traditions, simply requiring that they affirm our baptismal vows. What is most important is that people believe and immerse themselves into the Way of the Lord – repenting regularly of sin (as Jesus taught us to pray: forgive us as we forgive others). Then we are set free to follow the example and teachings of Jesus together and learn to obey all that Christ has commanded us.

So ... are *you* ready to declare these vows of baptism? If already baptized, will you *renew* your baptismal commitment? Anyone who would like to join the membership preparation session after worship today is welcome! Just come.

To all of us is proclaimed the challenge: *Repent! Turn away from all sin and evil. “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Believe!* Believe the good news and allow the Lord to wash you clean. Immerse yourself in the Way of the Lord.

Hymn 447 *O Jesus, I Have Promised*