

When I was ordained in 1997, my goddaughter Nikki was 6 months old. Her parents and I went to college together. Many a weekend we spent hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire – in all sorts of weather. We saw each other through tough climbs; sweated, ate and laughed so much our sides hurt.

So, when it came time for Nikki's baptism, her parents asked me to do the honors. I was honored indeed. Even though it was a drizzly, October day, it was fitting that we hiked out into the woods to a cold, running stream. I waded into the stream and Nikki was placed in my arms – a tiny bundle with a fuzz of hair – in her white baptismal dress. I scooped up the flowing water and drenched her little head, saying those now very familiar words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

That simple ritual, that holy sacrament, was so different from the baptisms I remembered from growing up in the Congregational Church. What do you remember about baptisms? I recall a crowded congregation, the smell of flowers and perfume, people craning their necks to get a glimpse of the tiny body swathed in ruffles and fluff. It surprised me to realize that there was something missing from that picture. Water.

That day out in the woods, we were in jeans and hiking boots, getting rained on – water-; standing in a stream – more water; and splashing icy waterfalls on my goddaughters little head – even more water.

Water is a simple yet powerful compound made up of only Hydrogen and Oxygen. Yet it is the basis of life. Maybe the fact that our bodies are made up of so much water explains why we are drawn to it. Watching waves crash at the seashore; the hammer of rain on the roof in a downpour; the trickle of a fountain or stream – we see it, hear it, even smell it – all this and so much more trigger responses in us to water in some shape or form.

Could that be why Jesus told his followers to go forth and baptize? Water is certainly part of it. Water is life – especially to those who live in arid climates. Rain may not fall from the sky so water must be found in deep wells. The prophet Isaiah says God will make streams flow in the desert. Streams of living water. Jesus told the woman at the well that he was living water. John the Baptizer said he baptizes with water and the Spirit, so when Jesus went into the Jordan with him, he gave us our first sacrament.

Jesus said to go forth and baptize...not just those we know, but all nations. Some zealous followers took that command to heart. There are hundreds, probably thousands, of stories of whole villages being baptized – often, sadly, forcefully without full understanding of what was going on. These missionaries, though noble in their goals, missed the point of what baptism signifies.

The outward sign of water – weather dripped, drenched or dunked – signifies a deeper belief that the Holy Spirit surrounds and fills the one being baptized. The Spirit cleanses the repentant of sins; graces the child with the nurture of community; and offers all of us a personal relationship with Jesus. Those

pieces are what got missed by the well-meaning who took Jesus at his word to baptize all nations. They just forgot the rest of Jesus words: "... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Just as Julia was baptized this morning; just as the new members reclaimed their baptismal vows; just as each of the children were invited in to be a part of the baptism – we all share a relationship with Jesus even as we share in his baptism. And how is he with us to the end of the age? Through our thoughts and prayers and actions as a community blessed by living water.

Now, if you were baptized as an infant, you will not likely remember your baptism. But if you were baptized as adults, you certainly will remember. Like my friend Carol. I stood as one of her sponsors on a big group retreat during which she chose to be baptized. It wasn't just a dribble of water either, it was a serious dunking. Carol was baptized in an April-cold lake, fully immersed, and shaking cold when she emerged on the shore. I could see by the look in her eyes she felt the Spirit. What surprised me was that I felt it, too. I had no idea simply being a part of getting someone all wet would deepen my relationship with Christ! But it did.

I was toying with the idea of literally getting us all wet today. By that I mean we could each reaffirm our baptism by what is sometimes called "sprinkling". Instead, I'll explain it and you can mull it over. Perhaps on Epiphany Sunday (that's next January) we will take part. One manner in which this happens is that each person comes forward and a branch, such as a pine bough, is dipped in the baptismal font and shaken over your head and face. It is a visceral experience, since the skin of our faces is so sensitive. The other way is that the leaders walk through the congregation, in the same manner, and sprinkle everyone in a broad sweep. Sort of like a little indoor rain shower. I've seen people laugh, giggle, be serious and even cry, as the waters of their baptism wash over them again.

Following worship today, I invite everyone to dip your hand in the baptismal waters up here. Whether you sprinkle it on your own head or simply feel the water, know that you have been given life, and life in Christ. You are blessed. You are forgiven. You are a child of God.

As a community blessed by living water...and fortunately this year no floods of it...we are promised Christ's presence with us. May we too, go forth, baptizing all nations, with our presence, our prayers, and Christ's peace. Amen.