

*The Un-baptized Arm*  
Based on Matthew 3:13-17  
January 16, 2008  
Aspen Community UMC

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In about the 15<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Russia there was a ruler named Ivan -  
remembered as Ivan the Great.

He was famous for bringing tribes and warring factions into what is now roughly  
the territory of Russia. He has been called the "gatherer" of all of Russia  
because he "so to speak" gathered these disparate parts and brought them together.  
He was a fighting man, a warrior, and considered a brilliant general.

However, Ivan was so busy waging these campaigns  
that he did not get around to having a family.

His friends and advisors reminded him that there was no heir to the throne.

Should anything happen to him the union would shatter into chaos.

The busy soldier statesman replied that he did not have time to search for a bride.

But, if they would find a suitable bride, he would marry her.

The counselors and advisors searched the capitals of Europe  
to find an appropriate wife for the great tsar.

And find her, they did.

They reported to Ivan of a beautiful dark eyed daughter of the King of Greece.  
She was young, brilliant, and charming – and he agreed to marry her sight unseen.

The King of Greece was delighted.

It would align Greece in a favorable way with the emerging giant to the north.

But there was one condition said the king of Greece, "He cannot marry my daughter  
unless he becomes a member of the Greek Orthodox Church."

Ivan's response was, "I will do it!"

A priest was dispatched to Moscow to instruct Ivan in Orthodox doctrine.

He was a quick student and learned the catechism quickly.

Arrangements were concluded, and the tsar made his way to Athens  
accompanied by 500 of his palace guard.

He was baptized into the Orthodox Church by immersion.

That was the custom of the Eastern Church.

His soldiers, ever loyal, asked to be baptized too.

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So, the patriarch of the church assigned 500 priests  
to give the soldiers a one-on-one catechism crash course.  
All of the soldiers were to be immersed in one mass baptism.  
Crowds gathered from all over Greece.

Picture this sight - 500 priests and 500 soldiers – a thousand people -  
walking into the blue Mediterranean.

The priests were dressed in black robes and tall black hats,  
the official dress of the Orthodox Church.  
The soldiers wore their battle uniforms with all their regalia – ribbons of valor,  
medals of courage, and their weapons of battle.

Suddenly, there was a problem.  
The church prohibited professional soldiers from being members;  
they would have to give up their commitment to bloodshed.  
They could not be killers and church members too.

After a hasty round of diplomacy, the problem was solved.  
As the words were spoken and the priests began to baptize them,  
each soldier reached to his side and withdrew his sword.  
Lifting it high overhead, every soldier was totally immersed except his fighting arm and sword.

A true story - *The Unbaptized Arm*.<sup>1</sup>  
Unfortunately, it is often a picture of us as Christians today.  
As if we were only partially baptized -  
as if only partially did our baptism bring the spirit to our lives.  
The story of the “unbaptized arm” is about our tendency to forget it and to live  
our lives as if baptism was only a partial immersion into this divine blessing.

Baptism is a request that the grace of God – divine grace be within and around  
us as we go through life – thus bathing our bodies and minds.

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By bringing our children for baptism - we are presenting them  
before God and before the community  
for this honor, this wish and hope that our child will  
live within the space and flow of Christ's love.  
If you have brought children for baptism, is that what you did?

And whenever this occurs – as children or adults – we consider it important.

I like to think about baptism as an incarnation of divine love  
in a practical way for our lives.  
But sometimes we deny the very energy and flow that it offers -  
especially as the years go by – and the struggles –  
and the triumphs and tragedies –  
and the times we scarcely notice as life goes by?

Richard Foster wrote a book entitled *Streams of Living Water:  
Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith*.  
One of the great traditions is what he calls the "Incarnational Tradition."  
The Incarnational Tradition comes from a belief that  
we live out the Spirit of God in the daily activities of our lives.  
The details of our lives take on a sacramental nature.

I talk about this because in the story of Jesus' baptism  
we can visualize how the Holy Spirit becomes a part of his being.  
So, likewise, we see the Spirit as part of our daily lives.  
We see the presence of the divine – of God  
as something in the rough and tumble of our lives.

Foster writes about a few people whose lives are testimony to this idea,  
and I want to share just one of them with you -  
and that person is Dag Hammarskjöld.  
Dag Hammarskjöld was the Secretary General of the United Nations  
and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961.

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He was a public servant at an early age in his home country of Sweden -

Minister of Foreign Affairs - served in the Swedish Cabinet -

but is best known as Secretary General of the United Nations.

Although they were never found until after his death in 1961,

he began his private reflections at age 20.

Interestingly enough his writings never mention the roles he played,

or the prominence he had reached.

A phrase that resonates throughout his book *Markings* was a "Yes" to life

and they are clearly his spiritual journey.

Here are some of his words:

*"I don't know Who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put.  
I don't even remember answering.*

*But at some moment I did answer yes to Someone – or Something -  
and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that,  
therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.*

Hear this? It seems like a kind of baptism.

*From that moment I have known what it means "not to look back,"  
and "to take no thought for the morrow."*

*...I came to a time and place where I realized  
that the Way leads to a triumph which is a catastrophe,  
and to a catastrophe which is a triumph.*

*After that, the word "courage" lost its meaning, since nothing could be taken from me.*

*As I continued along the Way, I learned, step by step, word by word,  
that behind every saying in the Gospels stands one man and one man's experience.*

A very personal spiritual journey

one that reveals this "yes" to life in all its variety -

no taking it in part and parcel – no unbaptized part.

It is as if his entire life enjoys this total baptism by spirit.

Hammaraskjold's spiritual journey must have prepared him

for all that he was to face on the international stage -

the mission to Peking in 1955 - intervention in the Suez Crisis in 1956

- to the mediation in the Congo in 1961 that took his life.

Many will say he transformed the United Nations

from simply a place for conference and controversy

into an agency of creative action for peace.<sup>2</sup>

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Perhaps history will tell us if his time of service was the zenith of the United Nations,  
or if it is yet to see its best days.

The "yes" to life in all its ways – surely it prepared him for the depth of work he was able to do.  
So beautifully revealed, only after his death, in his writings – *Markings*.

And our story of *The Unbaptized Arm*, while historically, true -  
is somewhat cavalier and superficial -  
although it happens – and we can point to places in our lives  
when we forget about this bathing in spirit – this *incarnation* – the spirit in everyday life -  
as we are busy with the hum and drum and interruptions of life.

Richard Foster is telling us that these very things are the sacrament of life.  
And I am suggesting that to remember the baptism of Jesus - and our own -  
is an invitation into the "Yes" of life in all its twists and turns,  
and, tragedies and triumphs.

And as for thinking about baptism in all its fullness – I think of lives like his -  
where we can almost see the stream of spirit – of baptism – of incarnation.

If anything, I want to invite you today to consider how the Spirit is alive in your life,  
how the stream of spirit – of baptism – of incarnation – is alive?  
And if it is not, what might happen to let it be.

I don't expect that you have recorded your journey. I have not.  
I do invite us all to be aware of how the deep streams of the Spirit are active,  
and that as you encounter the ups and down of life,  
you have the opportunity to give that same resounding "yes."  
And when we do that, life is fuller, life is richer.  
For the baptism of Spirit invites a "yes."

So, may *The Unbaptized Arm* remind you of our forgetfulness and hesitancy.

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And may hearing a little about someone like Dag Hammarskjold  
(with the suggestion to take some time with *Markings*)  
invite you to consider how the Holy Spirit is active in your life -  
and when you have the chances to say "yes."  
Thinking about our scripture, as we follow Jesus down to the water  
where he places himself into the hands of John  
and into the waters of his own baptism  
may we reflect on its bigger meaning. It's a pretty special thing.  
It is the time we first recognize the presence of the divine in his ministry.  
And it is when we first think about the divine in our own lives.  
Then, it is simply the time to let it live,  
let it guide us,  
and let us enable us to say "yes."

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional story adapted from Wayne Dehoney

<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster. *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of the Christian Faith*. P. 259.