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August 8, 2026

Matthew 28:16-20 - Common English Bible

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Good morning UMC, thank you for being here this morning as we continue to reflect on *Why we believe what we believe*.

In their mid-90s Mennonite history book, *Through Fire and Water*, (SLIDE) Harry Loewen and Steven Holt describe the original Anabaptist-baptism moment this way..

It was on a Saturday, almost certainly the evening of January 21, 1525, in the house of Felix Manz and his mother. A group of fifteen young people, some single and some married, had gathered for Bible study, prayer, and discussion. Suddenly a young man wearing a blue jacket got up, walked over to Conrad Grebel, and said, "Baptize me. Baptize me in the name of God with true Christian baptism." George Blaurock's request surprised Conrad Grebel and the others. Baptize an adult who had been baptized as an infant many years ago? Moreover, Conrad Grebel was not a priest. He had no authority from the church to baptize. Most importantly, to rebaptize anyone was illegal. The authorities could fine them, expel them from the city, even kill them for breaking the law.

Blaurock was still kneeling, waiting for baptism. Grebel then reached for one of the Manz family's kitchen dippers, partially filled it with water, and baptized Blaurock in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Then, at the request of the others in the room, Blaurock baptized the rest of the group.

Not to put extra pressure on you today, young Ben Schonberg, but you are following in the footsteps of folks who took baptism very seriously.

The Anabaptist movement got its name as a bit of a harsh slam. (SLIDE) The term means "re-baptizer"; the joke being that these foolish people did not realize

that no one needed to be baptized twice. This movement of rebellious people could have quickly been squashed out, but there was something in their commitment to living out what they read in scripture and shared in community, that meant that 500 years later there are thousands of churches and denominations, just like the Mennonites, who have decided that a foundational and formational principle is to hold off on baptism until a person can make a decision on their own.

This was a monumental shift at a time where baptising new-born infants, as had been the practice, connected baptism with state-controlled census and taxation. Making a claim for believer baptism became a moment to personally profess a faith claim in a public way, rejecting the powers and principalities of that time.

When early Anabaptist and Mennonite leaders were asked about the scripture basis for believer baptism, they often pointed to the Matthew passage (SLIDE) that we read this morning. It was a shift as the community began reading the Bible on their own terms, rather than just simply accepting the messages from those in power in the church.

As Christianity became more established and spread around the world, there was a belief that baptism was an important ritual protecting the baptised person from eternal damnation. (SLIDE) In times where infant mortality was far more common than children growing old, it made sense to try and protect a soul at birth, long before a person reached adulthood. Those who advocated for infant baptism would point to Bible verses such as 1 Peter 3:21 (SLIDE) which implies that baptism saves the person, and John 3:5, that we are born of water and the Spirit, to support the idea that the ritual actively participates in saving the soul, and it should ideally be done at birth.

Our siblings in Christ from other denominations who practice infant baptism typically have confirmation classes later in life. Baptism is seen as the initial sacrament of inclusion and rebirth in the Christian church, whereas a confirmation class which comes later is the educational preparation course that leads to confirmation; that moment where a baptized person has a chance to reaffirm their personal faith later in life.

The Matthew passage from this morning gave Anabaptists grounds to shift from a belief that baptism was an important sacrament at birth, to a belief that baptism was a symbol for a different kind of Christianity. (SLIDE)

Mennonites used scripture teachings to view baptism as a *personal* and *voluntary* choice, a symbol of an inward conversion, and an outward conscious pledge to follow Jesus. It also made following Jesus a somewhat rebellious choice, rather than a religious ethnicity that was passed on at birth by a decision your parents or local parrish made.

Our Anabaptist history reminds us that believer baptism was never intended to be a passive inheritance or default. It was a rebellious act of reclamation, a voluntary choice to step out from the shadows of state-sanctioned religion and into a personal and sometimes dangerous, conscious relationship with Jesus, shaped deeply by community. Believer baptism continues to uphold the value of a lived commitment over a bestowed identity. It transforms our faith from something we simply receive into something we actively claim - a daily decision to align our lives with the radical way of Jesus, even when it is in opposition to social or cultural expectations of our time.

Our current Mennonite Confession of Faith (SLIDE) that we have discussed over the past few weeks, has a whole article on baptism. I found it interesting this week to discover this footnote below the article – (SLIDE)

*Some churches refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbols, sacraments, or ordinances. In this Confession of Faith, these ceremonies are called **signs**, a biblical term rich in meanings. A sign is not only an act of God, but a human action as well. Baptism is a sign, representing both God's action in delivering us from sin and death and the action of the one who is baptized, who pledges to God to follow Jesus Christ within the context of Christ's body, the church.*

Not a sacrament but a sign.

Mennonites have also traditionally tied this baptism sign with church membership. (SLIDE) And in many congregations church membership has also been tied to being able to participate in communion, followed by footwashing. I remember being somewhat disappointed at the church we worshiped with before

UMC, that the youth at our church who were not baptized, were not allowed to participate in communion, and therefore felt excluded from sharing in the intergenerational practice of footwashing which followed every communion time.

Today Ben Schonberg is not just getting baptized, he also becomes a voting member, as far as I'm aware despite some basement ping pong shenanigans, in good standing at our church. Tying church membership to baptism is an interesting wrinkle that scripture doesn't address. The Bible offers us glimpses of the early church of course, but little was ever said about things like church membership, structures, and congregational decision making. Those who have held leadership roles at our church throughout the years may have wished that there was a bit more from Jesus about church membership. (SLIDE)

We should pause here to note that our beliefs about baptism and membership here at University Mennonite Church have also included moments of disagreement and church tension during our 60+ years of history, where some folks were adamant that those wanting to join and become members here at UMC *must* be baptised as adults, while others argued that a personal confession and confirmation of faith was perfectly acceptable for those who were baptised as infants in other traditions and simply wanted to become new members. What was clear during those times of disagreements was that community process was important to discern together, but it wasn't easy. It took many months to find common ground, with some of our most adamant traditionalists wishing that we had been less lenient, seeing Believer Baptism as a firm rule, rather than a suggested guideline.

This week I heard a story about the way baptism had been used as a gatekeeping method. This person remembered a friend who had been re-baptized at least three different times as they moved from church denomination to church denomination. Their infant baptism was not enough to satisfy their first church, so they were baptized again as an adult, (SLIDE) with water poured on their head. The next church they went to required baptism to be done through immersion, (SLIDE) so they went and were fully submerged. The next church on their journey explained that baptism wasn't legitimate unless done in an actual flowing river, (SLIDE) so they jumped through that hoop too. But by this time they admitted that being baptized had lost all meaning. It was no longer

a personal symbol, but something that was done out of necessity and procedure just simply to belong.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that a core value would become a point of contention in churches, but those who have navigated church disagreements know just how much those tense points can linger on in our memory, especially when they are disagreements about those deepest held beliefs.

The other dynamic I want us to consider today is how our age and experience plays a role in believer baptism. The loose guideline of "old enough to make a personal profession of faith" has been something I've been reflecting on this week. Was I old enough as a young teenager, strongly influenced by my peer group, who had sort of decided as a group to be baptized together? (SLIDE) Yeah, that's me in the middle, around the time of my baptism, with the cut off sleeves and bleached hair. Was that guy ready? I remember thinking that if my younger sister was willing, what's stopping me? Is that a good reason to be baptized?

It is also not lost on me that even if I had waited a few more years, I still wouldn't have been a fully formed adult. Modern scientific findings have shown that in men, our brain's frontal lobes, home to key executive functions such as planning, working memory, and impulse control, are among the *last* areas of a man's brain to mature; and that they may not be fully developed until halfway through the third decade of life. Men out there, if you are not yet into your late 20s, you still have a way to go before you're fully grown.

This week Meredith and I celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary, (SLIDE) and in the midst of that we also recognized that we are very different people now than we were when we made those vows. Does that make our original commitment less legitimate? And maybe more importantly, did Meredith realize she was marrying someone without a fully formed brain?

Ben Schonberg, (SLIDE) it's been so nice to get to know you a bit more over the past few weeks. And know you are not alone in making this decision this afternoon. You're wise beyond your years, even without a fully formed frontal cortex.

In all seriousness though, as we reflect on these baptismal stories, (SLIDE) from George Blaurock's quiet kitchen baptism to our own modern parallels, may we remember that, just as in a healthy marriage, a baptism is not the end, nor is it the beginning, but rather it is the next step in a long journey of continually recommitting to something significant.

I invite us all to continue to reflect on our faith commitments as more than singular milestones, but as part of an ongoing journey. Just as it will be for Ben this afternoon, it is a daily pledge to follow the example of the one who promises to be with us until the end of the age.

Whether you were baptized decades ago or are still wrestling with that choice, we are all called to live out this faith with the same intentionality as those who came before us. And the best part is, we don't have to do it alone.

May we carry this spirit of devotion out into our own community, serving as a living symbol of God's transformative love, and a conscious witness to the way of peace and reconciliation. May we savor the water of life, as it cleanses us time and time again, and may we continue to be led in the way of Jesus.

Amen.