

Baptism in Christian Tradition

We are delighted to respond to your request for information about the sacrament of baptism and we look forward to being of service to you. We offer this overview to help you understand our practice of baptism at First Congregational Church, as well as the broader Christian perspective and tradition to which we proudly belong.

Throughout the New Testament we encounter baptism as an important expression of Christian Faith. We read in the Gospels that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River at the beginning of his ministry. Some years later, in the book of Acts, we read that three thousand new believers confessed their faith and were baptized on the day of Pentecost. We discover that in the early church, entire families were baptized together – thus combining both infant and adult baptism. And, we find that in baptism Christians experience forgiveness and new life, initiation into the fellowship and mission of the church, and the invitation to a life of discipleship.

While the practice of baptism may vary somewhat in different traditions, the substance and meaning of the sacrament in our history and theology remains constant.

Baptism is an ancient practice. The long stretch of history tells us that Christians have celebrated baptism in every land over the past two thousand years.

Baptism is a sacrament. In fact, it is one of two sacraments celebrated in the United Church of Christ – the other one being the Lord's Supper or Communion. Two meanings of the word sacrament are helpful to understand. One is that a sacrament is a tangible way in which God is present. Hence, in the water of baptism and in the bread and wine at the communion table, we have the sacramental presence of God represented in tangible symbols – water, bread, and wine. A second definition is that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Applied to baptism this means we believe that in the water, a visible and outward sign, we participate in God's grace, an inward and spiritual gift.

Baptism is a means of grace. This follows closely with the understanding of a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. More particularly, for every life there come moments when the miracle of God's grace becomes real in very personal ways.

There is a felt sense that God is very near and that the moment bears a special blessing. Baptism is such a moment when the gift of life, the power of love, and the convictions of faith are all held together before God in this light.

Baptism is a promise. In the words and water of baptism, a promise is made to teach and live the Christian faith. That promise is extended in three directions: by parents on behalf of their child or by an individual for him or herself, by the congregation in promising the sustaining ministry and presence of the church, and by godparents who promise to help a child to grow up into the Christian Faith. Incidentally, while having godparents is not a common practice in the United Church of Christ, we at First Church welcome this if a family should desire the special relationship of godparents for their children.

Baptism is a birth. Your child was born when the waters of birth opened, and she came forth into the world. As the waters of baptism touch her head, she is invited into the spiritual birth of a relationship to God. In many expressions of Christian tradition, the symbol of the water, in fact, connotes a dying and rising again in Christ.

Baptism is a sacred obligation. As you present your child for baptism, you are promising to invest a special love in his life, a love experienced by raising him in the Christian Faith. This is an awesome task and one that can be fully realized only by taking your own faith as parents seriously. The church stands ready to support you in that task and to encourage your growth as you tend to the growth of your child.

Baptism is an act of worship. In our tradition, baptism normally occurs in the presence of the worshipping congregation. For this reason, private baptisms are rarely done. It is also why we ask that photographs of this special moment be taken after the ceremony or service, rather than during the sacrament.

How Can I Learn More?

The first step is to make an appointment as soon as possible to meet with one of the ministers. During that appointment the minister will get to know you and your particular desire for baptism. In consultation with the minister, appropriate plans will be made.

Additional Information

Often people ask whether there is a gratuity or cost for providing the sacrament of baptism. There is no fee or gratuity expected.

It is helpful to remember the important relationship between baptism and confirmation in the United Church of Christ. Most often, baptism occurs in infancy as parents and the church make promises on behalf of a child yet too young to speak for him or herself. The corollary to this is confirmation, usually as a child enters her or his teen years. At this time the child, now grown, is asked to confirm the promises once made on his or her behalf. A confirmation class taught by the ministers precedes the rite of confirmation. To put these two acts in a visual image, baptism and confirmation are like two bookends in the process of Christian initiation.

Minister

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First Congregational
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Baptism

Practices and Guidelines

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