

July 1

Baptism Is... relationships

*"In your **relationships** with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."*
Philippians 2:5 (MSG)

One of my better decisions was to take the Dale Carnegie Course. I paid attention to it and connected it to my being baptized. They gave me a book; How to Win Friends and Influence People. I read it. That helped. 😊

The Word is pretty good on how to build good **relationships** with God, and with other people, and I'm baptized so the Spirit enables me to grasp it.

It's simple. Just have the attitude that Jesus had! "In your **relationships** with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

Why do we have difficulty in our **relationships**? When we have a different mindset than Jesus had. Which word in that sentence don't we understand? 😊

Many of the problems I've had in building **relationships** have originated from my deep-seated sinfulness. The simple answer is, "Ed, get off yourself!" How bad must a **relationship** break down before I consider the possibility that I'm not living my baptism when I am blaming someone else? "Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me."

Okay, here is one of my favorite lessons in life. It is big, and it's an easy barometer. In my marriage and family, also in ministry, there are times when we are exhausted. Our gas tank is on empty, we need to fill our tank as soon as possible.

The solution is obvious – take a break! Shift to a **relationship** and share it. My mentor **relationships** have been precious. Dr. Speed Leas told me, "The biggest mistakes in my life occurred when I was tired." Wow! How much is that idea worth? \$50,000? My bias is, "Priceless...could be life or death."

Today my awareness of being baptized is very clear – tiredness is a gift of God. Rest is too. Share this gift with someone you are in a **relationship** with, related by baptism. I connected with my spiritual director...

July 2

Baptism Is... contentment

*"I have learned to be **content** whatever the circumstances."* Philippians 4:11 (NIV)

"Give thanks in all circumstances." 2 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV)

I have so many blessings. I am sure that if I could list them all, starting in the morning, I would fall asleep in the evening, **content** before I finished.

I don't make a big deal about this. I'm not spending my time praying for stuff, but praying for what I already have!

Think about it. That is literally how all my prayers get answered. 😊

I don't worry (maybe some, but just not that often). I find that, through my life-long research, when I'm grateful – I'm happier, and I am clearly aware of God's design for my life.

That same research has revealed this corresponding truth when I'm ungrateful – I'm irritable, and I'm not even thinking about God's design for my life. You'd think of that with all this research evidence, I would be done researching, wouldn't you?

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Philippians 4:6

Jerry Hoffman taught me whenever someone asks how I am, saying, “I'm grateful. How are you”?

Today, reflecting on my being baptized, my Spirit-filled eyes already allow me to see that I'm going to be **content** today. (And when I'm not **content**, again by this Spirit I can re-connect.)

July 3

Baptism Is... no force

*“People who are attempting to **force** (the law) on you have only one motive: they want to look good before others. All their talk about the law is gas. They themselves don't keep the law! They are highly selective in the laws they do observe. They only want to boast of their success in recruiting you to their side. That is contemptible!”* Galatians 6:11 (MSG)

My hunch is that some of what I say comes directly from God. I also have more than a hunch that many things I say are gas! 😊 Your part in our relationship is to let me know which is which.

New Year's resolutions are usually gas. A person can have all kinds of goals and not accomplish anything. How is that helpful? Well, for one thing, it reminds us that no one is forcing you to set goals. My being baptized does not compel me to set goals. On the other hand, my being baptized compels me to set goals!

Negative thinkers have goals too. “My goal is to pay my lousy bills.” That's a goal all right, but, as my mentor said, “If a person has no goals, you can guess their bank account.” And where they're headed. Well-articulated goals are inspirational. They focus and energize.

When I get to 100, I will set some new goals. If today is my last day, as Luther is credited with saying, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.”

Our verse for today is a litany of warnings of setting goals that are driven by wrong motives. That’s the only dark side to goal setting, and it’s a big one. It is also an easy one to eliminate with God’s help. Luther’s legendary quote suggests that faith is not merely thinking holy and happy thoughts.

No act of faith is more constructive than setting incredible goals! Failure is not a matter of failing to meet your goal. Failure is not seeking the possibilities. Today my being baptized reminds me that God gives us the privilege of setting goals that will distract us from our distractions. At the same time, the Holy Spirit, with **no force**, inspires goals that might inspire others who are hurting, and facing problems we are unaware of.

July 4

Baptism Is... going on to the next town

*“Some of the Jews convinced the most respected women and leading men of the town that their precious way of life was about to be destroyed. Alarmed, they turned on Paul and Barnabas and forced them to leave. Paul and Barnabas shrugged their shoulders and went **on to the next town**, brimming with joy and the Holy Spirit, two happy disciples.” Acts 13:50 (MSG)*

As a pastor, whenever I thought about leaving a congregation, I asked myself two questions, “Have I accomplished everything I can accomplish in this congregation?” And, “Is it time for me to leave and go to another town?” I regularly concluded that it was my divine call to stay right there. Whatever the conflict, it seemed like it was not the time to **go into the next town**.

Today, it seems that there are times when it’s a good idea to **go on to the next town**, and maybe go a little beyond the **next town** geographically. The question that lingered was whether my desire was based on avoiding something that I should deal with responsibly.

Paul and Barnabas went **on to the next town**, “brimming with joy and the Holy Spirit, two happy disciples.” That’s an inspiring thought.

Today I invite you to make it a special day to reflect on how your being baptized empowers you and frees you to decide when to leave or stay. It also suggests a very inspirational idea – maybe you can stay where you are AND start a worshiping community **at the next town** at the same time! A satellite? A house-church? Some are calling it, “From Steeple to Sofa.”

My prayer – “O God, thank you for offering baptism as a sign of your 24/7 presence. Make me a happy disciple, like Paul or Barnabas, either one.”

July 5

Baptism Is... being glad

*“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit you. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. **Be glad** when that happens – skip like a lamb if you like! And all heaven applauds. Know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.”*

Luke 6:22 (MSG)

Some people come home on Sunday and have “roast pastor” for lunch. Equally problematic, we have all been bystanders when others are looking for things to criticize, without encouraging them, “I see it another way...”

There are two different applications that come to mind. First, whenever you and I criticize, condemn, or complain, we are not happier. The author Eric Berne called it a game people play, called, “Ain’t it Awful!” Two people conspire to take turns – one grouches and snarls, and the other says, “Ain’t it Awful!” And then they switch toxic roles.

One of the most powerful phrases in Luther’s Small Catechism is the meaning to the eighth commandment phrase, *“You shall not lie against your neighbor, betray, slander, or defame your neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.”* The first application is, “Stop doing this.” Or, “Stop being silent when you are around those who do this.”

The second application that comes to mind must give us clues about how to respond when other people openly do these things to us. My story is that I used to have hurt feelings, or be wounded and angry. Dr. Phil would ask, “How’s that working for you?”

Letting go is not as natural as “water rolling off a duck’s back,” unless you’re baptized, of course. It is equally human to set ourselves up to be victims.

Today, *“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down. **Be glad** when that happens!”* How awesome is that! Let go of everything that bothers you.”

Remember, you are baptized!

July 6

Baptism Is... healing of memories

“Let not your heart be troubled.” John 14:1 (KJV)

“Fret not yourself.” Psalm 37:1 (KJV)

We emphasized letting go of everything that bothers you in yesterday's devotion. Today we focus on what may be the single most dominant discourse in our lives that has bothered us in the past and can bother us to pieces in the future if we don't let it go, namely, letting go of grudges.

St. Paul says, "forgetting the past"

Have you been hurt by someone in the past? Have you talked to them about it? If you did, was that helpful? Have you ever heard the phrase, "dwelling on it?" What does that mean to you? What is it most difficult for you to "get over?"

There are all kinds of reasons that people have difficulty getting over things. Worry. Stress. Any kind of anxiety. I'm going to pick on just one roadblock to getting over something – holding a grudge.

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, do you include, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive..."? If you think about it for just 30 seconds, you will agree that that's a dangerous prayer to pray if you're holding a grudge!

Today I'm thinking of a couple of people whose bad behavior has hurt me, and my being baptized is enough to turn me completely around. Being baptized can even motivate me to contact that person, "____, I owe you an apology... I've had some hurt feelings about what you said/did, and I want to clean it up to **heal my memories**, and I ask you to forgive me."

July 7

Baptism Is... celebrating

"Celebrate God. Sing together – everyone! All you 'honest hearts,' raise the roof!"
Psalm 32:11 (MSG)

"Good people, cheer God! Right-living people sound best when praising. Use guitars to reinforce your hallelujahs! Play his praise on a grand piano! Invent your own new song to him; give him a trumpet fanfare. For God's word is solid to the core. He loves it when everything fits." Psalm 33:1-4 (MSG)

Would you agree that most people, and even entire congregations, don't **celebrate** enough? I understand that some people **celebrate** too much. I don't need to draw that picture. 😊

I'm thinking more like healthy **celebration**; an expression of gratitude, praising others for something they've done or said. Praising God! What a concept!

Enjoy the present moment. **Celebrate** what God has done in your life recently. **Celebrate** the blessings that are waiting for you. Being baptized, you can **celebrate**

the unknown! Someone told me, (I think it was a pastor) “Replace the boredom of the predictable with the excitement of uncertainty.”

Expecting a child? Or a grandchild? Or the possibility of a new job? Or gratitude for noticing a Spirit-sighting? Or maybe it’s a little thing, like a surprise phone call, text, or email that was not little at all. Perhaps it was exactly what you needed that day.

Being baptized gives me the lifelong freedom to imagine a wonderful life possible, also for that new baby...

Today my being baptized is all that I need to think of something to **celebrate** God’s blessing in my life, and maybe even our congregation! What has our congregation **celebrated** that God has done in the last year?

July 8

Baptism Is... rejecting negative advice

“Since you laugh at my console and make a joke of my advice, how can I take you seriously?” Proverbs 1:25 (MSG)

“The king’s answer was harsh. He spurned the advice of the elders and went with the advice of the younger set.” 1 Kings 12:12, 2 Chronicles 10:12 (MSG)

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.” Psalm 1:1 (NKJV)

I confess that at times I have set myself up to be a victim by hanging around with the wrong crowd.

I can think of times when I should have **rejected the advice** that I was given, or at least ignored it. Raise your hand if you have ever felt that way.

There are all kinds of bad-advice people – some that discourage us, others that try to steal our dreams, and frankly, people who are not thinking about my welfare as much as what is in it for them!

How about the coworker-gang you hang with or your associates for which the Word gives you many warnings? On Sunday morning after worship, do you usually talk to the same people?

What kind of material what are you allowing to enter your brain? What movies do you watch?

Negative advice is toxic to faith. The flipside of that is **rejecting negative advice**. Sorting out what you hear that is God-pleasing from what is gas; and throw away the negative thoughts and emotions.

One way to recognize bad advice is to ask yourself, “Why am I being tempted to listen to this, instead of challenging it, or at least getting away from it as quickly as possible?”

Today, because I'm baptized, as a friend of mine said, "I'm going to double check what I allow my mind and my mood to be exposed to. I will clean up my mental act, starting now!" I can do that! It comes with being baptized, and the Holy Spirit is in my heart.

July 9

Baptism Is... reviewing

"Simon Peter asked, 'Master, just where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'You can't now follow me where I'm going. You will follow later.'" John 13:36 (MSG)

It crosses my mind that we cover so many ways that we can apply God's grace in Jesus Christ through being baptized, and that it would not be excessive occasionally, to **review** some of those devotions that have been helpful. I have some favorites and I'm going to reflect on being baptized today by looking back at one or two that have meant the most to me.

The interesting thing that occurred to me with this idea, is that some of these devotions have not meant as much to me as others. But that was then and this is now. If I were to look at some of the devotions that I've used in the past that didn't mean as much to me, maybe today is the day that they will, so I don't want to simply neglect them because they weren't memorable!

Repetition is one of the laws of learning. Some people call it a mantra, because repeating it every day helps a person to internalize and make it part of their daily living.

That is our baptismal promise – repeat this habit of reflecting on our being baptized every day, and an amazing thing happens, through the Holy Spirit!

One of my routine spiritual formation habits is to ask, "WIGIAT" – Where is God in all this?"

Maybe this devotion is intended to get you on the ball in some area of your life. Perhaps you've been putting it off. As the prophet Elijah said, "How long are you going to sit on the fence?" Good question!

Today I am going to look back, **review**, and prepare for something Jesus wants me to learn in the future. Isn't that what baptized is all about?

July 10

Baptism Is... reversing the negative

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" Romans 12:21 (NKJV).

I used to think this verse simply meant to "turn the other cheek," or having will power, or not having enough money. I was wrong. This verse is about our life-direction! Are you ever overcome by evil?

What if I mention to my wife, “Our car has over 200,000 miles on it?” So what? “We need a different car?” Really? Is it a safety issue? Would the current necessary repairs cost more than buying a different car? If yes, that’s fine, although evil is creeping in overcoming this discussion.

Relax. Whether you get a different car is completely up to you. If yes, you need a car... you know what to do. But if the answer is “Not necessarily,” by definition, “you don’t need it.” There are many choices for transportation. Perhaps you’d need both the new car and a bigger house. Why not get both if you can afford it? After we buy it, we can justify it.

One approach of dealing with objections is called “**reversing the objection.**” Whatever the objection, you can turn it into, “Yes, that is the very reason you should buy it today, because...” And the reasons may be good, so good that it **reverses a decision**, and that’s fine too.

This has something to say about how congregations make decisions. Sometimes one loud voice can drown out a wise decision. One “we can’t afford it” that ignores God can cause a congregation to close its doors, unnecessarily!

Just one calm voice can **reverse the noise**, “I feel just the opposite. God can do this, and I believe we must do this, and the timing is right.” Suddenly God appears when faith appears. The Holy Spirit in one person’s heart **reverses the negative situation** and turns it into a call from God to which the people’s voice can prevail.

Today I’m going to act like I’m baptized by noticing an opportunity to **reverse a negative conversation** and let the Holy Spirit have a vote.

July 11

Baptism Is... launching one step

*“Start with God – the first **step** in learning is bowing down to God; only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom and learning.” Proverbs 1:7 (MSG)*

*“I never lose sight of your love, but keep in **step** with you, never missing a beat.” Psalm 26:3 (MSG)*

*“Josiah was eight years old when he became king. He lived the way God wanted. He kept straight on the path blazed by his ancestor David, not one **step** to either left or right.” 2 Kings 22:1 (MSG)*

I remember when I needed some physical therapy to learn to walk again after surgery. That first **step** was difficult. Taking that first **step** turned into serving God.

*“Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to **step** in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service,*

not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us asking ourselves, 'How can I help?'" Romans 15:1 (MSG)

*"Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in **step** with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing." Colossians 3:15 (MSG)*

*"Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them **step by step**" Acts 11:4 (MSG)*

Are you unemployed? Take one **step** and commit to keep on living a meaningful life. Do you have people problems or are you frustrated? Are you tired? Are you grieving the loss of someone in your family? Your friend? Your spouse?

Take one **step** of being grateful. Take one **step** and watch for a Spirit-sighting. Today that one **step**, even though I am baptized, seems like a very big wall. Holy Spirit, wake me up to the reality that I'm likely to run into the same basic frustrations no matter where I go. Walk with me as I **launch this first step**, in Christ.

July 12

Baptism Is... swallowing hard

*Jesus said, "Listen now, all of you – take this to heart. It's not what you **swallow** that pollutes your life; it's what you vomit... Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you see that what you **swallow** can't contaminate you?" Mark 7:14, 18 (MSG)*

*"Many among his disciples heard this and said, 'This is tough teaching, too tough to **swallow**.'" John 6:60 (MSG)*

You and I have both collected enough hurts to keep us from wanting to press forward. Setbacks can take the joy out of faith. Even success can make us the target for people who want to steal our dream.

Be careful not to become a skeptic. Hiding hurts, doubts and opinions in your heart can sabotage your faith. **Swallow** your hurts as an emetic, and let your body regurgitate them or digest and excrete them. Take responsibility for them, then flush once, and you will have traded them in for the solid assurances of the Holy Spirit.

"The Holy Spirit is no skeptic. He has written neither doubt nor mere opinion into our hearts, but rather solid assurances, which are more sure and solid than all experience and even life itself." – Martin Luther

Jane Rubietta speaks of the power of story, "You've must tell your story! What if your life story isn't just for you, but for other people as well? They can learn from your courage, your face, and your Spirit. Your story can change people's lives."

Today the sun hides behind the clouds. I remember a friend of mine who lost his capacity to **swallow** in his last days. Thank you, Lord, for the capacity to **swallow...** and flush... Being baptized, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ calls us to repentance and

makes it possible for me to delight in the Law and frees me for the Gospel. And...the sunshine just came out from behind the clouds!

July 13

Baptism Is... surrendering to love

“Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another has fulfilled the law” Romans 13:8 (KJV)

“The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender... Neither a borrower or a lender be.” Proverbs 22:7 (KJV)

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love drives out fear.” 1 John 4:18 (NIV)

A mentor of mine said, “When I **surrender to love**, I can’t make a big mistake.”

If I have been hurt by someone and have a grudge against them, is this the time to let go? Should I keep trying to get others to see my point of view? Am I afraid? Am I in doubt? These are the moments to consider doing the most loving thing. In faith you can do it. Faith dares to **surrender to love!**

One of the most powerful applications of being baptized is that grace is the right answer for the most difficult of questions. Is this the time for you to step down and retire? Should you stop fighting this cancer?

What does having cancer have to do with being baptized? It is an amazingly personal thing! The Holy Spirit reveals new options. Being baptized gives you and me new ways and choices.

In baptism, the Holy Spirit of love gives us the capacity to love. Do you worry? Love drives out worry. Are you afraid? Perfect love drives out fear.

Are you in debt? Is a creditor asking you for what you owe? Being baptized can help you let go of all things, and that frees you up to see things differently no matter what you’re struggling with.

Today, O Holy Spirit, remind me that being baptized enables me to **surrender** anything I am fighting inwardly, **surrendering** it to the power of love. It is God’s way for me to live, no matter what circumstances surrounds me. **Surrendering to love** at the loss of a loved one is not defeat but victory. **Surrendering to love** creates the joy of gratitude in Christ. That is life-changing. That is love-changing!

July 14

Baptism Is... surprises

*“Asking for a tablet, Zachariah wrote, his name is to be John. That took everyone by **surprise**. **Surprise** followed **surprise** – Zachariah’s mouth was now open, his tongue loose, and he was talking, praising God!”* Luke 1:63 (MSG)

I am clear about the awesomeness of God being filled with **surprises** that are not always appreciated! Some bosses tell their coworkers, “I don’t like **surprises!**” That’s not true, of course. What they mean is that they don’t like nasty **surprises**, namely, being blindsided, not in the loop, failures in communication. The Word says, *“Fear-of-God is life itself, a full life, and serene – no nasty **surprises**.”* Proverbs 19:23 (MSG)

When I am centered in the Word, I am amazed at the immediacy and the centrality of **surprises**. I am especially **surprised** at the daily **surprises** that are birthed by my reflection about being baptized.

Is “Are you baptized?” a strange request? Not at all. On the other hand, to ask someone if they are baptized organically shifts to being **surprised!** Remembering who I am in Christ is one of the most surprising and empowering actions of my life, and it is always the best time to take it.

Being baptized, as I read the Word, has no nasty **surprises**. Jesus’ father and mother were **surprised** by Simeon right after Jesus was born, *“This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, a figure misunderstood and contradicted – the pain of a sword-thrust through you – but the rejection will force honesty as God reveals who they really are.”* Luke 2:33 (MSG)

Today I am reminded that being a follower of Jesus is a life of **surprise**. Jesus’ miracles took the crowd by **surprise**. The Pharisees were regularly **surprised** by Jesus questions. I don’t always appreciate **surprises** at the moment they occur, but being baptized makes me eager for **surprises**.

July 15

Baptism Is... a surprise to your enemy

*“If you see your **enemy** hungry, go buy him lunch; if he’s thirsty, bring him a drink. Your generosity will **surprise** them with goodness, and God will look after you.”* Proverbs 25:21, Romans 12:20 (MSG)

In warfare, there is nothing more than important than the element of **surprise**. Attacking the **enemy** requires **surprise** if one’s purpose is to hurt and defeat the **enemy**.

The balancing life principle is that the element of **surprise** is also transformational in our lives. **Surprise** is elemental to humor. The turn of a phrase, the punchline, changes listening into laughing.

Surprise can take a little mistake and make it a big mistake, and it can take a big mistake and turn it into a transformational teaching moment.

Bob worked for IBM, once made a three-million-dollar mistake, and he said to the boss, "I suppose you are going to fire me." "The boss told me, "Fire you? I just invested \$3 million dollars more in you. Why would I fire you?"

What a baptismal story! Today I'm going to Google Bob and renew our friendship. I remember when he was the president of our congregation. That year some enemies came out in the open. I remember Bob welcoming their emergence, often dealing with it with laughter and even joy!

Today, because I'm baptized, I'm going to look for the surprising humor in whatever comes my way today, knowing that the Holy Spirit specializes in **surprises**. What I'm aware of at this moment is that the Holy Spirit takes all the \$3 million-dollar mistakes I've made in my life, and not only forgives them, but uses them as lessons that have transformed my life, and there may be one today that transforms my life again.

July 16

Baptism Is... singing

"Sing unto the Lord a new song; proclaim the good news of his salvation day today, His wonders among all people." Psalm 96:1-3 (NKJV)

One of my favorite discoveries is a new song that becomes part of my life. In recent years, two songs have become very special to me: "I Was There to Hear Your Morning Cry" by John Ylvisaker and "Christ Has Made Us Friends" by Ken Medema

My friend Phyllis said, "**Singing** is my very favorite thing to do."

Craig sent me a Walt Whitman poem that has become a multi-genre song "I Hear America **Singing**" that may be my next being-baptized-surprise:

*I hear America **singing**, the varied carols I hear, Those of mechanics – each one **singing** his, as it should be, blithe and strong, The carpenter **singing** his, as he measures his plank or beam: The Mason **singing** his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work, The boatman **singing** what belongs to him and his boat – the deckhand **singing** on the steamboat deck, The Shoemaker **singing** as he sits on his bench – the hatter **singing** as he stands, The wood-cutters song – the plow boys, on his way in the morning, or at the noon intermission, or at sundown, The delicious **singing** of the mother – or of the young wife at work – or of the girls sewing or washing – each **singing** what belongs to her, and to and no one else, The day what belongs to the day – at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly, **singing**, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs."*

Today I will be thankful for being baptized giving me creativity to **sing** new songs – some that are comforting and others that are convicting. My being baptized means that because I got up this morning I am a winner. I'm ready for a new song. Dear Ever-living God, today as I **sing**, I will arrange the notes in my heart, "Thank you for sparing me from problems. Thank you for relieving every pain in every danger that I will ever know. Thank you that today my mood is changing. Thank you for that miracle. Thank you for this great day on the Lord. Thank you for turning me around.

July 17

Baptism Is... embracing this God-life

*"Jesus was matter-of-fact: **embrace this God-life**. Really **embrace** it, and nothing will be too much for you... I urge you to pray for absolutely everything, ranging from small to large. Include everything as you **embrace this God-life**, and you'll get God's everything."* Mark 11:22 (MSG)

*"Holy **embraces** all around! All the congregations of Christ send their warmest greetings...not just because of the ritual but because they were willing to live in the risky faith-**embrace** of God's action."* Romans 16:16, 4:12 (MSG)

*"All the friends here say hello. Pass the greeting around with **holy embraces!**"* 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:11 (MSG)

*"Those who hear the Word, **embrace** the Word, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams!"* Mark 4:20 (MSG).

When I am a guest-worshipper in your congregation, and you have the "handshake of peace," and I see people touch each other, even hugging, I don't feel comfortable. I am not afraid of getting germs. I understand the importance of "safe hugs." Note! Some people don't like being touched.

Under certain circumstances I like to hug and be hugged, even in worship. The Word describes holy **embraces**, and they are fine in worship. Attention Worship Leaders! If you make clear what is happening, I can look each person in the eye, recognize distance, and agree with the idea, with some holy **embrace**, touch or not, "God's peace be with you," with a real smile.

For some people, it may be the only hug they get all week. When I visit shut-ins monthly, my holy **embrace** is often the only hug they got all month.

Today, Holy Spirit, thank you for **embracing** me. Being baptized, I pray you help me be sensitive to each person you put in front of me. Help me let go of my hesitance to **embrace**, and look in your eyes with the eyes of my heart, to notice, just notice... Teach me the holy **embrace** that is Jesus-like, and give it with the best baptized-look... because I **embrace this God-life** that day.

July 18

Baptism Is... character-building

“I’m baptizing you here, turning in your old life for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: the (Spirit) will ignite the kingdom-life, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He (Jesus) will make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.” Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16 (MSG)

The Bible verse says, “...changing you from the inside out.” Now that is **character-building**! Being baptized is not a game! It is lifelong living with God. Is there any rule warning against being baptized too soon? When does an infant begin living into being baptized?

When I was born I was not expected to live. I was baptized when I was less than an hour old. I’m so grateful. It has never meant more to me than it does now. On the other hand, every day of my life has been blessed by my being baptized.

Sad to say, there are people in congregations who think it’s their responsibility to fix other people! Is that **character-building**? I don’t think so.

Baptized people need to fix their behavior every hour, but as persons, they do not need fixing! God already has fixed them in Christ, and reminds them of this every minute in their baptism. No one needs for you to fix them.

Today my being baptized leads me to speak up when faced with arbitrary, negative judgments. I can notice when somebody is not baptized, and refer them. Simply ask them. Better yet for initiating a faith discussion, go with them, to see pastor.

July 19

Baptism Is... gladly taking the blame

*“As soon as it Abigail saw David, she fell on her knees at his feet, saying, ‘Master let me **take the blame**! Don’t dwell on what that brute Nabal did.’”* 1 Samuel 25:23 (MSG)

*“I’ll **gladly take all the blame**. If we had gone ahead in the first place instead of procrastinating like this, we could’ve been there and back twice over.”* Genesis 43:8 (MSG)

“Jesus said, ‘You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. Look instead for what God can do.’” John 9:3 (MSG)

Joseph said to his brothers, *“Don’t blame yourselves. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives in an amazing act of deliverance.”* Genesis 45:4 (MSG)

Scott Marcum, in his 20's, put an ad in 3 newspapers in the United States and Canada that said, "I'll **take the blame** for anything for \$20." 😊 People sent him \$20, told him what they wanted him to **take the blame** for – crazy drivers, lousy weather, racism, the government, lousy neighbors, you name it. Scott responded, "I'll **take the blame**. You can let go of it now." Some were glad for Scott, and it only cost them \$20! 😊

That's what Jesus did. Jesus took our blame for our entire sinful condition, and everyone else's sinfulness too. We have lots of evidence in writing! Every time the Word says "whosoever," "all," or "world," your name is there. Oh yes, and it's on our certificate of baptism!

Today I thank God for his gift of baptism. I can **gladly take the blame** graciously for anything. I especially enjoy seeing how I feel when I apologize for my anger, or bad feelings, or anything I had against the other person. I lose my bad feelings!

Scott Marcum smiled all the way to the bank! My smile is that my apology frees me! Wow! What power there is in gladly **taking the blame**! And it doesn't cost us any more than enough breath to blow out a candle! Excuse me a minute – I need to tell my wife, "I was wrong."

July 20

Baptism Is... blessed to be a blessing

*"I will **bless** you; I will make your name great, and you will be a **blessing**. I will **bless** those who **bless** you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on earth will be **blessed** through you."* Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)

When I came to the United States, I was 9 years old. One thing I discovered in our country was "famous people." They were heroes! Another thing I discovered was that I had a pencil, with an eraser, and I had a pencil sharpener, so I could write sharp letters!

Later I used a typewriter. And I could write letters, erase the errors, and send those letters to these famous people – athletes, movie stars, and national leaders. They would read my letters, and answer them! If I asked them for their picture, they sent it to me. They became my pen-pals! They were my heroes and role models, and I posted them in my scrapbook, my gallery of people I had "friended" and "texted."

I felt that I was famous, because I knew somebody who was famous, and because they knew me, and my pictures and letters proved it. And I looked at their pictures and read their letters often.

Abraham and Moses are my heroes. I have the very words that Abraham said, written by God, through Moses. Moses wrote, "Abraham was **blessed** to be a **blessing**." I have autographed copies of five books of Moses that have been translated into

hundreds of languages. And the words that they spoke and the autographed set of their books were given to me! They are my heroes, my pen-pals, and I read some of their letters every morning!

And I have been “**blessed to be a blessing**” and just like then, through the Internet, “all the people on earth will be **blessed!**” How awesome is that!

Today I have a baptismal certificate from God, in Christ, autographed by the Holy Spirit, in the Word. Whatever God is calling you to do, wherever it is God is calling you to do it, notice the call! It is a personal call. We are **blessed**. Why? The Word gives us the answer – we are to be a **blessing** to the world. That’s why.

July 21

Baptism Is... mending fences

“I don’t want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don’t want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at **mending fences**.” Ephesians 4:1 (MSG)

That is your story and mine, written in a letter by God through the apostle Paul, about our congregations! It is our gated community, for a lifetime, remembering that the gates are to open to everyone as well as closed to keep out danger!

Our congregations are to be about “**mending our fences!**” comes from agriculture over all planet earth. Cattle get out of their pasture because of a hole in the fence, and sometimes they made the hole themselves!

The Word says, “*One day I walked by the field of an old lazy bones, and then pass the vineyard of the lout; they were overgrown with weeds, sick with thistles, all the fences broken down. The fields preached me a sermon and I listened – ‘a nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there, sit back, take it easy – do you know what comes next? You can look forward to a dirt-poor life with poverty as your permanent houseguest!’*” Proverbs 24:30 (MSG)

Congregations all over the United States and Canada, and perhaps around the world, are about **mending fences** that have been broken down by the very people God created, and God’s call to **mend those fences** is urgent. If you have forgotten God’s call, here is your reminder, “*God was reconciling the world unto himself and has commissioned us to be ambassadors of reconciliation.*” 2 Corinthians 5:19-20.

Today the good news of the gospel is that by baptism we already have all our **fences mended** by God, and the cross and empty tomb of Jesus broke down all barriers to our relationship with God and everyone in the world. All of this happens through the

Holy Spirit, and being baptized is a message to me personally as well as our congregation, “for the sake of the world” to be “reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.”

July 22

Baptism Is... answered prayer

*“God’s angels set up a circle of protection around us while we **pray**.”* Psalm 34:7 (MSG)

“Before they call, I will answer; and while we are yet speaking, I will hear.” Isaiah 65:24 (KJV)

When I was a child, I thought **praying** was the Lord’s **Prayer**, a bedtime **prayer**, “Now I lay me down to sleep...” a mealtime **prayer**, “Come Lord Jesus...” That’s all there is to it, right? 😊

I learned, and am still learning, that **prayer** is an all-day attitude, a 24/7 spirit – praising God all day long, thanking God all day long, and giving all our worries and troubles to God all day long. “Without ceasing” means “continually,” “regularly,” “always,” “constantly,” “never stopping,” and/or “persistent.”

I’m still learning that much of what we **pray** for has already been answered, and we don’t even notice that God has already given us everything!

*“Peter was kept in prison. But the congregation **prayed** to God without ceasing for him.”* Acts 12:5 (MSG) While the congregation was **praying**, Peter was already free, while he was in jail!

Being baptized is an announcement of a perpetually-forgiven lifestyle. The cross and the empty tomb were breaking news of what God already decided and did. The sacrament of holy baptism, water and Word, announces what God has already promised. What we can learn now is our awareness of what God is still doing, through the Holy Spirit.

*“From the first day we heard of you, we haven’t stopped **praying** for you asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will.”* Colossians 1:9 (MSG)

Today I thank God for forgiveness already declared, spiritual gifts already given, our congregation meetings already directed. Wherever we are, God is already there ahead of us. Make me aware, Lord Jesus. “This is my story; this is my song, praising my Savior, all the day long.”

July 23

Baptism Is... signed and sealed

“You were marked in Christ with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” Ephesians 1:13 (NIV)

The post office offers a service called registered mail, a letter or a package, personally handed to us, “There you go, **signed, sealed, and delivered.**”

Being baptized is a once-for-all-time verb, “there you go, **signed, sealed, and delivered.**” It is like the Greek aorist, a “just once verb” that has been done once for all time.

That’s the way it is with being baptized. No need for a mulligan, or a do over. It’s not how much water was used. 😊 You are covered for life.

When we were baptized, and ever since, the Holy Spirit has been there. The pastor makes the **seal** of the cross “on the forehead and upon the breast, that you have been redeemed, **signed** in blood on the cross by Jesus Christ who died for you and rose again,” also once and for all! The baptism ceremony is registered, once and for all, in the official congregation records.

True story: Kimberly was disabled, had no disability insurance, and no home. Her great-grandmother had left her an inheritance, but Kimberly had to prove that she was a descendent of her great-grandmother. *“All our legal documents were lost in the fire when our house burned down. There’s nothing I can do.”*

Her great-grandmother had been baptized in our congregation. Her baptism date was recorded 80 years ago! There it was, sealed and forever recorded – and Kimberly inherited her great-grandmother’s estate! She went from homeless and no family to home and family.

Today, I think about how one person being baptized has benefited someone else. Though Kimberly was poor, she was rich, “**signed, sealed, and delivered.**” How amazing. Equally amazing is that Jesus “became poor that through him we might become rich.” I am baptized into Christ. Is that important? Does your baptismal story make a difference in your life? Might your being baptized make a difference in someone else’s life?

July 24

Baptism Is... managing conflict

“The last enemy is done away death.” 1 Corinthians 15:26 (NIV)

I see death as the biggest **conflict**, since birth. You and I are going to die. Nothing can stop it from happening. In addition, since birth, I have been an enemy of God, and there is nothing I say or do can **manage** that **conflict**.

But God can, and did. God **managed** the **conflict** about my dying. God **managed** the **conflict** of my being an enemy of God. God reconciled me and you to Himself through Jesus Christ. *“You – once being alienated, and enemies in the mind, in the evil works, yet now did He reconcile...”* Colossians 1:21 (NIV) *“God was in Christ reconciling the world (that includes me) onto himself through Jesus Christ”* 2 Corinthians 5:19 (NIV).

“The strife is o’er, the battle’s one,” our Easter hymn says. What we call our “sanctuary” in our church building is a reminder to us that God is our sanctuary, faith is our sanctuary, and being baptized is our sanctuary. *“Now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.”* Romans 5:11 (NIV)

The greatest **conflict management** of all time was that all of us, **conflicted** with God, and enemies of God, were hopeless because no human peacemaking could do a thing about it. Only God can. And God did.

“If when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” Romans 5:10 (KJV).

Today I am discovering in a new way how being baptized has made me the heir of everlasting life, and because baptism is God’s grace, being baptized overcomes every **conflict** and shatters every barrier. I am constantly reminded that I still live in **conflict**, much of it of my own making. And I am constantly reminded that, being baptized, all my **conflicts** have already been **managed**. I think it might be a good idea for me to live like that. ☺ And in Christ, I can do exactly that. Thank you, Holy Spirit.

July 25

Baptism Is... healthy control

*“A lover of strangers, a lover of good men, sober minded, righteous, kind, **self-controlled**.”* Titus 1:8 (NIV)

*“The fruit of the Spirit is **self-control**.”* Galatians 5:23 (NIV)

“A city broken down without walls is a man without restraint over his spirit!” Proverbs 25:28 (NIV)

One of my toughest battles in life is to **control** what I want to **control**. You know what I mean? I mean to tell you something I’m very ashamed of – I really like being in **control**. It gives me a sense of power. Humility has not yet seized me.

Maybe if I can find how **control** can be a good thing I’ll feel better. How does this sound? There is a **healthy control** and there is a sick **control**. When I am trying to **control** others for my benefit, without regard for other people’s benefit that is sick **control**. I get that.

What makes sick **control** healthy **control**? I can't even **control** my computer! Is technology God-given? The tech vocabulary is curious – “save,” “friend,” “like,” “invite” After every session with tech support, I get an evaluation that asks, “Was that fruitful?”

The Holy Spirit in Christ enables me to bear fruit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, AND **self-control**.”

Today being baptized makes a bigger difference in my life. Being baptized cleans out the cobwebs in my life and frees me from the necessity of thinking everything out. Being baptized frees me from the need to **control** and gives me **self-control**. Being baptized gives our congregation the Spirit-given capacity to bear fruit rather than to seek power. In 2 Corinthians 12:10 (MSG) St. Paul suggests, *“Take limitations in stride, and with good cheer. I just let Christ take over!”*

July 26

Baptism Is... laughing together

*“There is a time to cry and a time to **laugh**.”* Ecclesiastes 3:2 (NIV)

*“**Laugh** with your happy friends when they're happy; shed tears when they're down.”* Romans 12:14 (MSG).

*“Applaud God! Bring your gift of **laughter**.”* Psalm 100:1 (MSG)

*“When the righteous see God in action they **laugh** and sing for joy.”* Psalm 68:1 (MSG)

I see a lot of **laughing**. **Laughing** is also God-given. I like **laughing** online, with emoticons! 😊

*“Why not help us make a fresh start – a resurrection life? Then your people will **laugh** and sing!”* Psalm 85:4 (MSG)

Today my being baptized is extra happy. Thank you, Lord God, for your Son Jesus Christ, and for the Holy Spirit. I love to **laugh**. Do you know how to make God **laugh**? Just tell Him your plans! 😊 I pray, dear God, that I'm thankful for the gift of **laughter**. And I ask that you help me to **laugh** more often, and not take myself so seriously. Show me again today how I can reflect on being baptized. (It's time for breakfast. I'm going to **laugh** with my family. I think they'll like it.) 😊

July 27

Baptism Is... here and now

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ.” 2 Corinthians 5:20 (KJV)

“We are speaking for Christ himself now.” 2 Corinthians 5:20 (MSG)

*“We don’t evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don’t look at him that way anymore. **Here** we look inside, and what we see is that everyone anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone by new life virgins! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him and then called us to settle our relationships with each other.” 2 Corinthians 5:16-19 (MSG)*

I have always felt that I was organized and not a person who delays doing things. Just don’t look at my desk, my unsavory habits that I say I want to get rid of, or my garage, or all the things that I have that I don’t want to talk about 😊 or my silly to do list.

Today I am convicted by the Holy Spirit to quit kidding myself – **here and now**. I admit that my life is full of inconsistency and disorganization and delay and procrastination. And I don’t need to do that because I’m baptized! Okay God, I already hear your voice, “Ed, you talk too much.” 😊 That’s my signal to listen and let go, **here and now**.

July 28

Baptism Is... holy

*“His baptism – a **holy** baptism by the **Holy** Spirit – will change you from the inside out.” Mark 1:7 (MSG)*

*“Train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and **Holy** Spirit.” Matthew 28:20 (MSG)*

“Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, and the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven.” Acts 2:38 (MSG)

I know that sacraments are man-made. I also know that they are God-given, commanded, and that they are means of grace, God’s grace!

My heritage is that baptism is a “sacrament,” “**holy** baptism.” My being baptized is a **holy** thing, a gift of God, and commanded. And in baptism I receive God’s grace – right now, forever, and all the time in between!

Do you know who said this? *“Teach baptism in a simple way to your household. What is baptism? It is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word. Which is that word of God? Christ our Lord says ‘Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the **Holy** Spirit.’ What benefits does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare... Without God’s word, the water is plain water, but with the Word of God it is a life-giving water, rich in grace, and the washing of the new birth in the **Holy** Spirit. What does such baptizing with water indicate? It indicates*

that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new person should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

– Martin Luther.

Today I am going to reflect on being baptized in the explanation, “as the head of the family should teach it.” What a **holy** way to start my day!

July 29

Baptism Is... active listening

“Listen from heaven and act.” 2 Chronicles 6:23 (MSG)

“Now, listen again to what God says.” 1 Samuel 15:1 (MSG)

“God listens the split second I called to him.” Psalm 4:3 (MSG)

“You refuse to listen to any of this, and now I am really angry. These god-making businesses of yours are your doom.” Jeremiah 25:7 (MSG)

“Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the spirit blowing through the congregations.” Revelation 2:7, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22 (MSG)

“Attention! God calls out to the city! If you know what’s good for you, you’ll listen. So, listen, all of you! This is serious business.” Micah 6:9 (MSG)

“The one who listens to you listens to me (Jesus). The one who rejects you rejects me. And rejecting me is the same as rejecting God, who sent me.” Luke 10:16 (MSG)

Active listening is a communication technique used in counseling, training, and conflict resolution. It requires that the listener fully concentrate, understand, respond and then remember what is being said.

The term “**active listening**” was coined by Carl Rogers and Richard Farson. There are four **active listening** techniques: paraphrase, summarize, clarify and reflect.

Active listening is a communication. The spiritual gift of communication is not about talking – it is about listening.

Today I confess that I can be stubborn – no one can compel me to listen! And yet, by being baptized, I am compelled to listen, repent of my stubbornness, and accept God’s forgiveness. Congregations are compelled to listen, “Don’t stay stuck in your ways! It’s God’s message we are dealing with here let your lives below bright before God” Jeremiah 13:15 (MSG). I must listen to the congregation’s story – then I can recommend God’s message to them.

July 30

Baptism Is... seeing others potential

“Never walk away from someone who deserves your help; your hand is God’s hand for that person.” Proverbs 3:27 (MSG)

My experience is that I am an excellent conflict management expert – for congregations that are motivated by the Holy Spirit, **seeing their own** and each **other’s potential**. I am also a poor conflict management expert for congregations that don’t **see potential**.

St. Paul wrote to a congregation in Corinth, *“Is it possible that there isn’t one levelheaded person among you who can make fair decisions when disagreements and disputes come up?”* 1 Corinthians 6:5 (MSG) If I am to serve God in a congregation, **seeing their potential** is vital!

I never have permission to give up on others, but always have permission to **see their potential**.

When adding staff in a congregation, we choose people who are more qualified than we are and have different spiritual gifts than we have. The height of folly is to fail because you didn’t want to **see the potential** by hiring expert help.

William H. Danforth, the founder of Ralston Purina in St. Louis Missouri hired a smart young man to lead the company. At one Board of Directors meeting, a stockholder asked Mr. Danforth, “How does it make you feel to have this young man get all the compliments?” Mr. Danforth confidently replied, “It makes me feel great. That’s a compliment to me! After all, I hired him!”

There is an expert who is skilled in solving your biggest problems – his name is Jesus Christ. His fee? His salvation is free! And through the Holy Spirit we can **see the potential** in abundant faith.

Today In being baptized I am **seeing the potential** for the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The divine paradox is that I lack everything and I lack nothing.

July 31

Baptism Is... cleaning up your room

“Get up, let’s get going!” Judges 19:28 (MSG)

To me, this is a mystery. Why do people need to be prodded to act now?

The Jim Rohn story: Jim’s mentor, Mr. Shoaff: “Question for you. Why haven’t you done well up until now?” Excellent question! Jim Rohn, in his 20’s, answered: “Here’s my list – Reasons for Not Looking Good – #1 my parents; #2 the government; #3 I’m broke; #4 I’m tired; #5 my lousy neighbors won’t loan me money...” Mr. Shoaff: Big problem with your list, Mr. Rohn – you aren’t on it! 😊

Another story: “Dear Abby, My parents are always on my case, telling me what to do – **clean up your room**, do the dishes, take out the trash, take a shower, finish eating, change your clothes! What can I do? Signed: –11 and Frustrated. Abby replied, “Dear 11 and Frustrated, This is serious. It could be ‘heart trouble!’ Get a checkup from the neck up. Until then, **clean up your room**, do the dishes, take out the trash, take a shower, finish eating, change your clothes!” –Abby.

The 5-yr-old’s Snowy Day story: Mother shouted to the other room, “For the last time, get out here and put your boots on! The school bus is coming around the corner!” The 5-yr-old cried out, “You don’t love me anymore.” Mother replied, “We will talk about my love for you at another time. Right now, get your boots on!” Good catch, Mom!

All three stories are about the same thing – **cleaning up our room** – now.

Of course, I am innocent, correct? 😊 My desk is a mess and I’m behind! I’m a good worker, hard worker, sincere! Jim Rohn shared with me, “You’ve got to be more than a good worker, hard worker, sincere. You need to be a good **room-cleaner!**”

Today – Oh yes, I almost forgot – I’m still baptized – “*Ed. get up, let’s get going!*” I want to **clean up my room**. I could even enjoy doing it! I think I’ll put this on my bathroom mirror – “Because I’m Baptized” list.

