



# Village Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)

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## Through the Water

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As I shared with you in this week's newsletter, in today's message we are remembering and thinking about our baptism – and also about the power and importance of water in life, both literally and symbolically. I want to start by sharing with you a story about one of my first experiences with the ocean.

A long time ago my sister Sherry lived in Hawaii, on Maui for about 3 years. On my first trip over there to see her, I couldn't wait to get to a beach and swim in the sea. I had always dreamed of playing in the waves and laying on the sand in the warm sunshine listening to the beautiful sound of the ocean.

So, the minute we got to her home we (my cousin Annette, Sherry and I) put on our swimsuits and headed for the beach. As we arrived at a secluded white sand beach, my sister commented, *"It looks a little rough today."*

I guess that was supposed to be a warning to be careful, but it fell upon deaf ears – for as I looked out across the sand and water, it looked gorgeous to me. Beautiful and inviting!

We quickly unloaded our towels and basket on the beach and headed for the water, Sherry and I in the lead. When we got out about waist deep, I stopped and turned toward the shore to wait on my cousin as Sherry headed on out deeper. It was only a second later that I heard Sherry yell, *"Oh, no!"*. As I quickly turned my head back toward her and the ocean, all I saw were her legs and feet as she dove into the water under what must have been the biggest wave ever to hit Maui.

Just kidding. Actually, it wasn't all that big - just 4 or 5 feet over my head from where I stood. But for someone who doesn't know what to do, it was a terrifying sight... And I soon found out that my terror was justified.

Before I could take two steps back to shore, I felt myself being lifted like a rag doll off the ground, into the air, turned upside down, and hurled back to the sandy bottom on my head with what felt like 1,000 pounds on top of me! I then was spun around in that position a time or two, enough to lose my sense of direction.

By this time, I had figured out that I was in real trouble. For just as I finally got my hands and feet down onto the sandy bottom, I felt a thousand fingers of saltwater grabbing me and pulling me out into the deep. I held onto the bottom with all my might and, when the pressure eased, decided I had better start swimming for the surface. So, I gathered my strength, pushed off the bottom and straightened up, just in time to discover that I was once again standing in chest deep water!

Now, you would think that an adventure like that – and the sore neck it gave me for three days – on the very first time I waded into the Pacific would have dampened my enthusiasm for ocean swimming. But the beauty and excitement of the sea proved to be just enticing enough for me to venture out into it again that afternoon and many times since... ..though never again with quite the casualness or confidence of that first time!

You see, I had quickly acquired what you could call a healthy respect for the power of the ocean!

Water, decisions, faith, danger and life. These are some of the things I want you to think about with me today. Water is a very powerful symbol for us... and not only for us in our church, but for all human beings no matter what their faith.

Water symbolizes life. In fact, you could say that it not only symbolizes – but actually is life! For without water not one living thing - no human, no animal, no reptile, no fish, no plant, not even an insect – could survive. We all need it, we are all made of it, and we all depend on it. So, water symbolizes life.

But water also symbolizes danger. Who hasn't seen, at least in pictures or on tv, the terrifying sight of a wall of water crashing uncontrolled over a road, bridge, or through a town? It seems like every week in today's climate there are floods that reek destruction and cause the loss of life in every corner of the world.

Also, if you've ever saw somebody in trouble in a body of water (be it a pool, lake, river, or ocean), you know how helpless the power of water can render even the strongest of persons. That which gives us life can also take it away in a matter of minutes.

In the first scripture we read today, the Israelites were faced with the dilemma of having Egypt's powerful army on one side of them and the menacing sea on the other. Even when God divided the waters and provided a path to safety and life on the other side for them, I doubt that it felt very safe to be walking through what had just the day before been the depths of a sea!

Yet, through the middle of this symbol of life and danger, God delivered them. It takes faith to go on a journey like that!

Then, in the second scripture we read, the disciples were following Jesus' instructions to cross the sea of Galilee – only to find their lives threatened by the awesome waves of the storm. When Jesus came walking on the sea and identified himself to them, Peter undertook an act of either great courage, reckless curiosity, or sheer stupidity, depending on your point of view. He stepped out of the boat to walk toward Jesus.

Peter almost made it, too... until the magnitude of what he was doing must have sunk in, and he began to sink. Luckily, Jesus was there and helped him finish the walk. You could say that it was a walk of faith, even though he faltered a bit and had to be helped in the end.

Now I want to read one more verse of scripture to you. This one is from the event of Jesus' baptism. Matthew 3:16 says: "And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him."

Again, in this story, water plays an important role. John was baptizing people as a sign of repentance – of turning away from sin and dedicating oneself to God. But for Jesus it was more than that, wasn't it? We have already noted that water, while it is vital to all life, is also dangerous in its power to take away life in an instant.

So, in Christian baptism, water is used as a symbol of both death (when submerged) and new life (when we emerge)... This new life is to be our Christian life, filled with and protected by the love of God – but not devoid of danger.

Jesus began his ministry and service to the kingdom of God after his baptism – and we, too, are called to live in a new way. It's a life blessed and guided by God, for sure, but there are still many, many challenges to be faced when we emerge from the water of our baptism.

Jesus faced lots of trials and hardships after his, and we for sure have challenges and trials in our Christian walk after our baptism... perhaps even more than people who have not ventured into the water! For, aside from life's usual ups and downs, we assume some new risks when we become Christian:

- We assume the risk of stewardship. The tradition of Israel was to bring the first fruits of flock and field as an offering to God... Not the last fruits, after enough to ensure one's survival and comfort was already stored up (or deposited in a bank). But the first fruits, trusting that God knows his children's needs and will provide for them.
- We assume the risk of witnessing. It's not that we, in our country today, are put in grave danger by confessing and preaching Christ in our society – we have the freedom to do that which is protected

by our constitution. But it is scary at times to talk about our faith and what God is to us, isn't it? Who among us has not been afraid that you won't know the right words to say, or that you will appear foolish to that person who needs to hear about Jesus?

- We assume the risk of loving. Loving takes us out of the safety of our isolation and makes us vulnerable to pain and rejection. We know that loving can be tough. Love can require us to confront destructive behavior and ask hard questions. Love calls us to give, even though sometimes the needs seem greater than what we have to give. Love calls us to see and empathize with people in pain and distress, and to help them however we can – even though some pain is very hard to ease.

So, these are dangerous waters, deciding to act as a caring and compassionate person... and the list of risks that we assume when we become Christian goes on and on. It's a risk to share another's burden. It's a risk to stand with the oppressed. It's a risk to seek justice. It's a risk to seek peace....

When we got baptized, however long ago it was, did we realize we were venturing into dangerous waters? If we had to do it all over again, would we follow Moses to the other side of the Red Sea? Would we set out in the little boat when the night is dark, and the waves are high? And, when we hear Jesus call to us, would we dare step over the side and walk toward him?

Those are questions I think we should all be asked when we are getting baptized, but it is also never too late to review them. You know, unfortunately, some people view baptism as merely a ritual that gives us a pass into heaven – but, in reality, it is meant to be a passage into a new and beautiful life right now... A true and everlasting life empowered by God's Spirit and guided by love – but that doesn't mean it is safe and easy!

Passing through water always involves some risk, and it takes faith to plunge in. But, luckily, we are never alone. Even when we are in over our heads (or perhaps particularly then), God is with us.

Jesus said, *"I am with you always, even unto the end."* I hope, as you have reflected over the past few days upon your own baptism, and what it has meant in your life, that you have been able to see many times when our Lord has been with you.

I also hope that remembering the waters we came through has helped us to realize that the journey is not over – we are still walking with our Lord, and hopefully just holding his hand a little tighter when the waves get rough. There is still so much work to be done in God's kingdom, and as long as we have breath in this world God is depending on us to spread his love, justice and peace!