

January 7, 2006  
Luke 3:15-22  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *A Water Mark*

If someone went through your wallet what would it tell them about who you are? For most of us, there is, of course, a driver's license, with the ohhhh so gorgeous picture, and the questionable information about height and weight. I wonder if men stretch the truth more about height and women are more likely to adjust the listed weight.

Our wallets are full of identifying information – where we bank, who handles our medical care, and the myriad store and organization cards. The more crucial those cards are for identification the more likely they have some kind of mark that is hard to forge. For instance Maine driver's licenses have the word Maine written across the bottom of the card. It's not readily visible but if you hold it up to the light it appears.

It's like a watermark. Watermarks are designs or patterns put into paper during its production. By making the layer of pulp thicker or thinner when it is still wet, the watermark is created. Often the design is not readily visible, but can be seen by holding the paper up to the light. The purpose of a watermark is to identify the paper. Today we mostly find it in high quality writing paper, serving as a signature of the manufacturer. In the past it was often a security measure to avoid forgery on important documents. Today those types

of security measures are handled by high tech computer graphics, like the word "Maine" on our licenses, or the holograms found on most bank cards.

As I was perusing my bankcards imagine my surprise when I noticed that the hologram on my debit card is a dove. It seemed just a little too uncanny with today's gospel story of the appearance of the dove at Jesus' baptism. So I checked all my bankcards. They all have doves. So I did a survey in the church office and discovered that VISA cards all have doves. MasterCard has a hologram of the world. It seems like they've got it covered – heaven and earth.

Identifying marks are all over the cards we use to prove we are who we say we are. But we also have identifying marks on our bodies themselves. Some we come with like birthmarks and fingerprints. And more and more people are adding marks and designs to their bodies with body piercing and tattoos.

In some religions, people use different marks and signs to identify themselves as belonging to a particular group. Some wear particular clothing, cut (or don't cut) their hair in particular ways, or pierce or alter particular parts of their body to mark themselves. For us, the tattoo that marks us as Christians is an invisible tattoo; it is simply a water

mark. The water of baptism is a mark that washes over our bodies and seeps into our souls, claiming and proclaiming that indeed each of us is a child of God.

When my husband, Ron, was about three years old his parents took him to the barbershop to have his hair cut. He was particularly intrigued by the tonic the barber sprinkled on his head. He didn't know it, but he was getting a haircut so that he would look spiffy for his baptism that Sunday. When they arrived home from church after the baptism, you won't be surprised to learn that Ron asked, "Did I get a haircut?" He knew something special had happened, he just wasn't sure what it was.

When Jesus was baptized he was a grown man. He was aware of what was happening and of the ramifications of receiving a water mark.

In Luke's gospel we have seen many signs leading up to this time, signs that give indication about who this Jesus is:

- The promise from the angel Gabriel
- The leaping of the child (John) in Elizabeth's womb upon Mary's arrival
- The angelic message of "good news of great joy"
- The revelations to Anna and Simeon about the identity of the baby Jesus.
- Jesus' own understanding that he 'must' be in this Abba's house.

And then Jesus comes to the waters. He becomes a marked man. He is marked with water. Held up to the light that mark becomes visible through the fluttering wings of the dove – a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit. God names and claims Jesus as, "my Son, my beloved."

This is both a blessing and a calling. A calling that we know will be filled with trials and temptations as well as light and laughter.

At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus receives a water mark – a mark that he will rely on time and time again to ground him in his calling.

Through our baptisms we too have been blessed and called to ministry. Many of us who were baptized as infants do not have conscious memory of our baptisms, but we know we too have received a water mark. As we test the spiritual calls that come our way and we ponder the tasks at hand, we would be wise to hold them up to the light of our baptisms. We may not literally see the water mark but if we are held up to the light, others will see the fruits of our spirits.

When I was planning a move back to Maine and I heard you were looking for an Associate Pastor, I asked around to find out what kind of church this is. I spoke to a woman in Brunswick, who belongs to another church, but who has had a lot of contact with this congregation over the years through Brunswick Area Interfaith Council. The first thing she said was, "First Parish has been a leader in the community in the establishment and development of many social service agencies over the last twenty years." She spoke with deep appreciation for the role this congregation and its leaders have played in the community.

I see our commitment to building a Habitat House as a continuation of this tradition. As a sign of our water mark, it is a fruit of our spirit. I hope we will

not only give money, which may be the easy part, but also give time and talent as the actual construction begins. In my previous experience with Habitat builds, I found them to be profoundly enriching experiences for all those involved.

In his writing "The Outset," John Stendahl reminds us that, as we journey through the years, we are wise to be grounded in our baptisms.

*"Not every cry can be answered  
and not every call is from God.  
So it is a blessing  
when we can thank God  
for the joy of purpose in our lives  
and for times when  
the call to a certain task seems clear.  
Yet even when our callings seem hard to  
sort out or beyond our ability to fulfill,  
even in the day of failure and betrayal,  
I pray to remember again the calling  
that comes first and last.  
The tasks and duties do matter,  
but what abides - -  
our identity, our belonging, our hope -  
- is heard here by the waters."*

*(Christian Century, 1997)*