

Mr. Andrews

Written and preached by Matt Matthews
from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church Champaign
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Mark 1:9-15

Have you seen this cartoon? An adorable, bald-headed baby holds a plastic phone. Her eyes are wide and round, as if incredulous. The caption of her conversation reads, “You won’t believe this. This guy in a dress tries to drown me in a bowl of water. And I kid you not, my family just smiled and took pictures.”

That adorable baby won’t remember her baptism, but her parents will, and so will the community of faith. The community around her will remember because they take vows to love her, to raise her, to teacher her about Jesus, to teach her about Christian service, to take her on mind-expanding mission trips and youth conferences. The community agrees to surround this family, siblings and parents, with love, to nurture, challenge, support. They will honor their baptismal vows—change her diapers, teach her Sunday school, pay the church bills—so that she will one day make vows of her own at Confirmation when she joins the church and claims the faith that has been passed down to her as her own.

I don’t remember my baptism. While I was there, I don’t remember a thing. I was a baby. I believe Dee Soule and I were baptized on the same day, because we were born less than a month apart. Dee and I were nursery mates, then in the same Sunday School classes and youth group growing up. Yes, Harriet Chappell—the lady I told you about on my first Sunday—was our teacher. The Hardwicks, our youth leaders, asked us interesting questions about faith, and held us tightly when the world came crashing down around our teenaged shoulders.

Rev. Dr. Louie V. Andrews, Jr. baptized us. I always respected him, but I always called him just Mister Andrews—no reverend, no doctor. Mr. Andrews read the scripture at our baptism. He gathered our families around. He poured the water. He prayed over it. Then—ladies first—he took Dee and baptized her. And me. I suppose he made the sign of the cross on our foreheads with his wet fingers. I supposed he formally introduced us to the gathered flock.

I was a baby. I don’t remember a thing.

But I’ve never forgotten the love of those gathered who said “yes” to the vows that Mr. Andrews asked of them. They said “yes” and they delivered.

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Mister Andrews taught me about being the church. Mr. Andrews died last Sunday as you and I finished our Sunday dinner. I want to tell you about him. I want to tell you about my mentor and friend.

In confirmation, I got in a shoving fight with Ricky Althouse. It was about something important, I’m sure. Maybe differing views of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. Mr. Andrews stepped in. He stepped in fiercely. He taught me that pacifism isn’t passive. Use your words not your fists. Be angry, but do not sin. I had let Mr. Andrews down, and I felt ashamed.

On Sunday mornings, I’d secretly follow Mr. Andrews around. He was a fun-loving man and had a great smile and laugh. But when he straightened up his Scottish tie and buttoned up his preaching robe and stepped into the sanctuary, he got serious. Something came over him. He was a different person. *Mr. Andrews taught me that our faith deserves our utmost seriousness and our most devoted attention.*

On Good Friday, Mr. Andrews would lock the church with chains and a padlock. This drove Mrs. Soule—Dee’s mom, and our choir director and organist—a little crazy I was told, because she wasn’t able to get into the church on the Saturday before Easter to practice her music. *Mr. Andrews forced me to ponder what would life be if the church were a tomb, locked, dark, dead.*

At Easter Sunrise, he sent one of us teenagers up on the roof. One cue, the teen clad in a white choir robe, would lean over the gutter and ask the crowd gathered in the dark at the front doors, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? The Lord is risen.” We’d bang on the doors and, at Mr. Andrews’ cue, shout, “Death come out!” He’d unlock the doors and we eagerly went into the warm church, to the sanctuary for worship, then to the Fellowship Hall for breakfast. *Mr. Andrews taught me that death never has the last word.*

For a fundraiser for the church, the teens were to deliver flyers from the local hardware store to every house in the surrounding neighborhoods. The boys in my crew got tired of walking from door to door, so we dropped a whole box of them in somebody’s garbage can. We hurried back to our meeting spot. Mr. Andrews found out—because he had eyes in the back of his head—and in no uncertain terms told us that when you have a job to do, you do it. Period. And when you make a promise you keep it. And, by the way, God keeps God’s promises. We should lean on God so that we can keep ours. *Mr. Andrews taught me integrity.*

When it came time for Rachel and me to baptize our first-born son, Joseph, I called Mr. Andrews to ask him to come to my first church I pastored in Arkansas and baptize Joseph. Mr. Andrews thanked me, but immediately said no. The presbytery of the church he served in retirement was meeting on the Monday after the baptism and he had to be at that Presbytery meeting. I asked him to skip the meeting, and he matter-of-factly said he couldn’t. He was speaking on behalf of gun control, of which he was in favor. I asked if somebody else could do it. And he laughed. “Matt,” he said, “there’s nobody in the whole presbytery who believes in gun control.” He said his motion would surely fail. Why, then, couldn’t he skip the meeting if it was a lost cause? Because, he said, somebody has to speak up for what is right. *Mr. Andrews taught me to be a fool for Christ.*

When my father had his heart surgery in Norfolk general and we camped out in the waiting room for all those hours and days, Mr. Andrews was right there. And I’m sure I’m not the only one who wondered: *If Mr. Andrews never left our side, was God here all along, too?*

Decades later, when Mr. Andrews was no longer our pastor, he was right by our side again at Dad’s funeral. *Louie taught me about friendship.*

Just about every time I saw Mr. Andrews, his wife was nearby. Louie was Dot were each other’s best friend. They were kind to one another and leaned on each other. She was his soul mate. *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews taught be about marriage.*

We were building and being the church of Jesus Christ. As a child, as a teen, and as a young man I was made to believe that I had a role to play, and play it I must. I was expected to show up and do my part. I believed that Mr. Andrews needed me because I was a church member and he was my pastor and we were doing ministry *together*. He ingrained into our heads that we were nothing less than the communion of saints. So I cleaned out gutters in the rain. Played football in the field during fish fries. Went to the men’s conferences, showed up (and slept) in worship, helped out in Vacation Bible School.

We were building and being the church. We were following Jesus, and Jesus was glad we were together.

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Technically, the Christian adventure begins at baptism. Jesus’ formal ministry began knee deep in the Jordan. The heavens ripped open. The Spirit, like a dove, descended from heaven. God’s voice came from heaven: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

Strangely, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the desert where he was tested. Scripture says he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him in his travail. After forty days, he came to Galilee *proclaiming the good news of God. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Our 'Christian' walk with Jesus, technically, begins at our baptism. What an adventure it is.

Like many of you, I Don't Remember My Baptism, But I Can't Forget the Love.

Friends, remembering our heroes of faith, let us live into our baptismal vows. Let us *build* and *be* the church of Jesus Christ,

In the name of **God the Creator,**

Jesus the Redeemer,

and the **Spirit our Sustainer.**

Study of the Torah

A prayer for illumination

O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — for generations now, our ancestors in the faith have searched for your word in the words of the Torah:

Some squinting in the dim light of flickering lamps in the Judean caves;

Some standing in the cold of stone monasteries before books chained to their desks;

Some peering through thick lenses as they rocked and read before their ghetto shops;

Some in furtive glances at the book hidden above the bunk at Auschwitz.

O God, it is our turn now. Keep us faithful, we pray, to so great a heritage.

In the name of our Rabbi and Friend, Jesus of Nazareth.

AMEN.

—W. Sibley Towner, *Prayers that Sing & Stir the Heart*, p. 14.

Mark 1:9-15 ⁹*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

¹²*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

¹⁴*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*