I’ve always found it intriguing that Alexander Mack, organizer and early leader among the Brethren, wrote more about baptism than any other subject. Reacting against the state churches of his day that wedded the political and the spiritual realms, Mack instead understood baptism as a freely-chosen expression of our primary commitment to Christ and our loyalty to Christ’s new way of living. In an open letter to fellow Pietists in Southern Germany in 1708, Mack and the first Brethren announced their decision to be baptized and form a new community of believers, inviting others to join them in this act of obedience to Jesus who urged his followers, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). “What is then better,” those first Brethren questioned, “than being obedient and not despising the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ?” (William Eberly, ed., The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack, p.10).

Yet today, baptism remains a central experience in the life of our church. Not only is baptism a meaningful experience for the individuals being baptized, but their baptism challenges all of us to remember the commitments we made at our time of baptism. In
Church of the Brethren understanding, baptism and church membership go hand in hand; not only do we make personal commitment to Jesus, but we acknowledge that we are now an integral part of the body of Christ. We unite with the community of faith—a people who have chosen to journey together in the footsteps of Jesus, embracing the upside-down way of living Jesus sets before us, a way of compassionate living, welcoming grace, courageous discipleship, bold peacemaking, new life.

The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Rome, reminded his fellow Christians that “we have been buried with Jesus by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). In The Message Eugene Peterson offers this paraphrase: When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into a new country of grace—a new life in a new land!

A new country of grace, in which we leave behind the realm of self-centeredness and greed, while opening ourselves to the transformation that comes through being touched by a love beyond measure. In her book Living into Community Asbury Seminary professor Christine Pohl asserts that “the best testimony to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together. Jesus risked his reputation and the credibility of his story by tying them to how his followers live and care for one another in community (John 17:20-23). . . . The character of our shared life—as congregations, communities, and families—has the power to draw people to the kingdom [of God] or to push them away. How we live together is the most persuasive sermon we'll ever get to preach” (Pohl, Living into Community, p. 2).
All this is to say that we grow into God’s love, not by imposing harsh demands and offering disparaging critique upon one another, but by extending grace and forgiveness to each other. To enter into a new community of grace is to commit ourselves to a culture of grace; it is to let the love of God enter deeply into our hearts, into our spirits, and even into our bones. It is not that we have already fully arrived in this culture of grace, nor that we have every answer to life’s perplexing issues. But together we commit ourselves to a life journey as a people who have tasted Christ’s new way of living and who grapple with what it means to live as Christ’s people in this day and in this place.

Some weeks ago I mentioned Neil White’s memoir, In the Sanctuary of Outcasts. Neil was an ambitious and seemingly successful publisher who over-reached and was convicted of bank fraud, having developed a pattern of transferring checks from one account to another when there were insufficient funds to cover those checks. In the early 1990s Neil was sentenced for that fraud to 18 months in a federal prison at Carville, Louisiana. There, he soon discovered, was also housed the last remaining residence in the continental United States for persons disfigured by Henson’s Disease—more commonly known as leprosy.

Generally there was little interaction between those convicted of crimes and those suffering from Henson’s Disease. Neil, however, was assigned to a work detail in the leper’s cafeteria, and over time he began to develop significant relationships with a number of the residents, including an elderly woman named Ella, then in her 80s, who had lived at Carville since being diagnosed as a young girl with Henson’s Disease. Despite a lifetime of isolation from the larger community, Ella displayed a gracious spirit and an abiding faith. Only days
before his impending release from prison, Neil sought out Ella, confessing his fear that he had not changed nearly enough during his months of confinement, that a similar thirst for the accolade of others and for personal status and acclaim remained deep within him.

“Hard on yourself,” Ella responded.

When Neil persisted, the aged Ella wisely told him, “You is what you is.” And then she drew his attention to a nearby garden lined with Coca Cola bottles. “You know about them drink bottles?” asked Ella.

When Neil indicated he did not, Ella told the story of her early days at Carville, when the Coca Cola distributor sent chipped and cracked bottles to the colony, so he did not have to accept returned bottles, fearing a public boycott should it became known that the glass containers had touched the lips of leprosy patients. “More drink bottles around here than you ever seen,” continued Ella, with crates filling closets and storerooms over time. But the patients discovered new uses for nonreturnable bottles: as flower vases with beautiful arrangements, as sugar dispensers in the cafeteria, as pins for impromptu bowling games on the lawn, and even being turned upside down and stuffed into the dirt to line flower beds and walks on the Carville grounds.

“Coca Cola bottle still a Coca Cola bottle,” said Ella. “Just found ‘em a new purpose.”

And so it is in baptism. We remain who we are, warts and all, persons able to offer healing yet sometimes creating havoc, persons capable of making peace and extending reconciliation, yet sometimes bringing disorder and confusion. Yet here’s the good news: we
can embrace new purpose. In our baptism we enter a new country of grace; we commit ourselves—empowered by the Spirit of God—to moving beyond self-centeredness, suspicion, fear, and greed, and embracing instead a new culture of grace, a new climate based upon self-giving love and servanthood. We take hold of Christ’s alternative vision—a new land in which gratitude and generosity, reconciliation and peace, compassion and grace beyond measure—these become the qualities that sustain us and begin to define our way of living.

Thanks be to God for the inexpressible gift of Jesus who makes this new life possible!

Amen.