



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish**  
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The Rev. Amy Richter  
 2 Easter: John 20:19-31  
 April 11, 2010  
 St. Anne's Church, Annapolis MD  
*Everybody's Baby*

Michael Lindvall is a Presbyterian minister and writer. He wrote a story about a baptism in a small town church<sup>1</sup> which I suspect is a true story, even if it is a work of short fiction.

Angus McDowell is one of the “blue-suited elders” of the parish, one of those Lindvall describes as “that dwindling breed of courtly, gentle, but inflexibly stiff patriarchs of the church. . . they seem to wear nothing but dark blue serge suits, a sort of uniform identifying them as members of an army in defense of the status quo,” keen defenders of “we’ve always done it that way,” champions of the routine, and firm believers in “there are some things that are just not done.” The pastor could depend on Angus McDowell and some of the other elders to be the first to question any change, to use the mantra “decently and in order” as the watch word for any church activity.

In this little church, they had a custom at baptism. After the baptismal candidate was presented, the pastor would ask, “Who stands with this child?” and then the extended family of the little one rises and remains standing for the ceremony. The custom was sweet – the proud family of each child standing, as if to say, “That’s my baby.”

One Sunday, the pastor discovered a woman who remained in her pew after everyone else had left the service, the last pew, the one closest to the door. The pastor went to speak with her. She hesitated and then said her name was Mildred Cory. After another long pause she said that her daughter, Tina, had just had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized right?

The pastor said, well, have Tina and her husband make an appointment and we'll make plans. Mildred hesitated again and said, "Tina's got no husband; Tina's just eighteen." She used to come to youth group, but then she started to see this older boy out of high school. She got pregnant, decided to keep the baby, and wants to have him baptized here. His name is James, Jimmy. Can it be done?

At the next worship committee meeting, the pastor brought up the baptism and started to explain what everybody in this little town already knew. Tina was an unwed teenage mother. The baby's father had left. Some people expressed concern about whether or not Tina really understood the commitment she was getting into in having the baby baptized. But the real issue was the picture everyone had in their heads: Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long gone, and Mildred Cory the only one who would stand when the question was asked.

The day for the baptism came. Tina came down the aisle, nervously, briskly, month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. She was so young, so alone.

The pastor read the beginning of the service and then came the question, "Who stands with this child?" He nodded slightly at Mildred to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly. The pastor looked back down at his service book and he was just about to ask Tina the parent's question, when he became aware of movement in the pews. "Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit," his wife beside him. "Then a couple of other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday school teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, the entire church was standing up with little Jimmy. Tina was crying, of course, and Mildred Cory was holding on to the pew in front of her as though she was standing on the deck of a ship rolling in a great wind, which, in a way, she was.

"The unexpectedness of this departure from the routine at first disquieted but then quieted us all, even little Jimmy. . . Every eye was on the child, who was for a moment everybody's baby.

"The Scripture reading that morning had been some verses from 1 John: 'See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. . . No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God

abides in us and God's love is perfected in us. . . there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.' In that baptism, those old words came alive."

In St. Anne's Church, because we are an Episcopal Church, we also have a custom. After all the parents and godparents, after those old enough to speak for themselves answer the questions, the priest asks the whole congregation to stand. Then everyone is asked this question: Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ? It's a little longer than "Who stands with this child?" But, we're Episcopalians, so we're a little more thorough. Not just, do you stand with this person? But, will you do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?

Yes – from this day forward, this person is your brother and sister in Christ. This person is your family. Will you do everything you can to support them in their journey in Christ? To help them grow and learn and follow Jesus Christ? To make this a place where every child, every adult, all ages and stages grow closer to the God who is nearer to us than our own breath, who loves us with an infinite love, who calls us all children of God?

On the night of the first Easter, the disciples encountered the Risen Christ, suddenly in their midst. Their sadness turned to joy, their fear was cast out by the love of their risen savior. They were given the power of Jesus Christ to carry out his work in the world, the work of reconciliation, forgiveness, proclaiming hope for all. He reminded them that he would never leave them alone. His Spirit was with them. And they had one another. They were to have one another as companions on the way.

We are to have one another as companions on the way. As we walk in the power of the Spirit, may we do all in our power to support one another in our life in Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The story is "Christmas Baptism," in *The Good News from North Haven*, by Michael L. Lindvall, 1991.