

Everyone a Minister
by Rev. Susan Morrison
Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2008

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying, “I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Leave it this way for now. We must do this to completely fulfill God’s justice.” So John reluctantly agreed. ¹⁶Immediately after Jesus had been baptized, and was coming up out of the water, the sky suddenly opened up and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I delight.”

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In this morning’s scripture reading from Matthew we meet Jesus as a grown man. We have no records of Jesus life between the age of 12, when he questions the religious leaders in the temple in Jerusalem and this encounter with his cousin John, approximately 18 years later. John’s ministry had started long before Jesus’ and this crude cousin, who had been born to Zechariah and Elizabeth a few months before Jesus, had made a name for himself as he went about the region baptizing people for the repentance of their sins. He was a wild man, living a radical, ascetic lifestyle, and preaching a fiery message of the wrath of God and the coming judgment on a sinful generation. For the Jews of John’s day, baptism was a common experience and was considered a ritual that washed away their sins and helped them to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

In this morning’s lesson, Jesus meets his cousin John at the river Jordan and asks to be baptized. John doesn’t want to do it. He knows that his cousin needs no baptism. But Jesus insists. And in that sacramental moment, there is a seismic shift in the meaning of baptism. Before this moment, the active agent in baptism was a human being, offering the washing away of sins. After this moment, the active agent in baptism is the Holy Spirit.

Marjorie Suchocki explains it this way. John’s baptism of repentance emphasized a person’s past. Those who came to John for baptism wanted to be cleansed of the sins that they had committed. They were washed clean with water. Jesus’ baptism of water and Spirit, does not only refer to past events of behavior; it entails empowerment for how we will live now and in the future. Baptism with the Holy Spirit doesn’t just cleanse; it opens us to the grace of God that guides us into a life in which holy loving is possible.

And William Willimon puts it this way. When Jesus appears at the River Jordan, insisting that he be baptized by John, something very significant happens. The action shifts from an act of man to an act of God. The heavens open; the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. A voice speaks “Thou art my beloved Son in whom I delight.” Jesus becomes the sign of the presence of God. God’s Spirit rests in and around and on him. This is the same Spirit of God who we met in the first sentence of Genesis, brooding over the formless earth, like a mother bird over her egg, cherishing it and willing it to life. This is the Spirit who came down, alighted on Jesus and claimed him as the son of God who brings God great delight. With Jesus baptism, the reign of God has arrived.

That same Spirit that descended and alighted on Jesus at his baptism is given to each of us at our baptism. We become God’s precious sons and daughters in whom God delights. That invisible mark on our foreheads is like a watermark.

A **watermark** is a recognizable image or pattern in [paper](#) that appears lighter when viewed by transmitted light (or darker when viewed by reflected light, atop a dark background). A watermark is made by impressing a water-coated metal stamp or *dandy roll* onto the [paper](#) during manufacturing. Watermarks were first introduced in [Bologna, Italy](#) in [1282](#); they have been used by papermakers to identify their product, and also on [postage stamps](#), [currency](#), and other government documents to discourage [counterfeiting](#). In the 21st century, there are also digital watermarks. A **digital watermark** is a signal which is embedded into digital data (audio, video, images and text) that can be detected or extracted later.

Baptism is like a watermark. It is invisible to the quick glance, but it is a mark that is an integral part of our being. It prevents counterfeit living. It is God’s gift, embedded in us forever.

What happens during baptism that leaves us with this eternal watermark? Our liturgy says that we are baptized by water and the Spirit. We know not only the ritual of cleansing, but the blessing of the Holy Spirit. God claims us. Baptism occurs not because we have come to God but because God has come to us. And through the act of baptism, we become members of Christ. In the Christian vocabulary, the word “member” doesn’t mean someone who joins, but rather, it means someone who is joined to Someone. Like the limbs and organs of a human body, we are joined to Jesus and to each other. Baptism is an initiation into that belonging. It is an initiation into the church.

Belonging to the church and being joined to Jesus means that we share in who Jesus is. Jesus was a minister. So, we too, all are ministers. That’s what our recent vision here at Holy Trinity calls us to do and be. Everyone in ministry ~ united by God’s love! The community depends on the priesthood of all believers. Everyone a minister! A few are ordained as pastor, but everyone in church is a minister through the sheer and sacred act of baptism.

What are the qualities? the signs? the marks of a minister? If we look to Jesus for our answer, we find that Jesus is described as being, among other things, prophet, priest and king or royal person. (Rev. Anthony Clavier; [episcopalchurch.org](#)) According to Father Tony Clavier, who is a priest in the Episcopal Church, that seems like a good place to begin in understanding what it means to be a minister of Jesus Christ.

At our baptism, we who are joined to Jesus become, like him, a prophet. And we become members of a “prophetic” community. Now being a prophet doesn’t mean that we go around making up new things. A prophet is someone who says “this is what God says, what God wants.” And we learn what God says as we read and interpret the scriptures and test the truth with tradition and reason and experience. And then we seek to live as Jesus lived. Jesus taught us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. It is an awesome challenge! Our church community provides us with resources and study groups to encourage our prophetic discipleship.

I see our new Relational Covenant as one way of being “prophetic” within our own community and being God’s prophets in the world, modeling forgiveness and love in our families and workplaces and in other situations where we find ourselves confronted by differences and diversity. Is it not prophetic for us to agree that

“We will be intentional in our respect for each other and celebrate our differences as we seek to live as a diverse, inclusive community in Christ?”

It begins by our accepting our own humanness and the fact that as humans we have limitations and flaws, burdens and gifts. We are far from perfect. And our neighbor, our church friends, our family members, our co workers are also far from perfect. They too are human. But because we have been baptized by the Holy Spirit, because we have been claimed by God, because we are God’s daughters and sons, we aspire to treat one another as God would treat us - with understanding and respect, with tolerance and love. It is a tall order! It takes learning. It takes practice. But as John Wesley said, “We are all going on to perfection.”

This is one of many aspects of what it means to be prophetic. Obviously, living a counter cultural life to the “me first” secular ways of consumption and greed and corruption defines prophetic living. Through baptism we are saying that God, not worldly values, owns us. Our theme song is not the Sinatra, I did it my way, but rather, “Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way; thou art the potter, I am the clay.”

Yes, because we are joined to Jesus through our baptism, we are members of a “prophetic” community and we are likewise members of a “priestly” community. As priestly people we treat every part of God’s creation with respect. God’s created world is sacred. “The earth is the Lords and the fullness thereof” the psalmist reminds us. We’ve learned that we can no long dominate and subdue the earth. Instead we must listen to what the earth and its inhabitants are saying to us and cooperate with creation rather than trying to be in charge of it. Bishop Dale White claims that we need to partner with creation, loving it as one would one’s own life partner. We need to become “priests of a cosmic sacrament.” The waters of baptism, would we ever think of polluting them? The bread and the fruit of the vine, would we ever contaminate them with toxins? Can not everything that God created be as sacred as our sacraments? And are we not God’s priestly people, as we try to treat all of life as holy?

As priestly people we also participate in the rituals and sacraments of our faith tradition. We feast at the communion table together and join in the baptismal covenant whenever there is one among us, like Dylan this morning, who comes forward for baptism. We also offer prayers for healing and comfort, hope and strength for those who are ill. Yesterday afternoon, at Roy Saunders bedside, a number of us were that priestly community for him. Earl Parker and I sang hymns to Roy and read him the psalms. Sharon Dunbar-Link was with him and his wife Shirley and singing “Are Ye Able” as Roy passed from this life to the next. Family members and friends had sat with him, keeping vigil. That’s what it means to be a priestly people.

We are members of a prophetic community, a priestly community and a community that is royal. As baptized Christians we are God’s “royal people.” Kings and queens that rule well seek justice for all their people. So, too, we serve one another and especially those in the world who are marginalized and oppressed. At Holy Trinity, we seek to be inclusive of all and, as a reconciling congregation, make that welcome clear to all as we celebrate our different sexual orientations and gender differences, our different racial and cultural heritages, our different economic and social contexts. We work to create the kind of community that Jesus envisioned where everyone is welcome and everyone is respected.

So that invisible watermark on our forehead is a sign that we are joined to Jesus and to one another. And the same Spirit that descended and alighted on Jesus at his baptism is given to us... and for the same reason. (Nathan Nettleton, *Why are we baptized? LaughingBird.net*) It is time to put the mission of the people of God before everything else in our lives. It’s time to turn the world upside down. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sick whom he healed. We are given the Spirit for the sick and broken and for those who are broken hearted and sad who desperately need healing and hope in our world. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sinners whose sins he forgave. We are given the Spirit for the sinners around us who are in desperate need of forgiveness and mercy. Jesus was given the Spirit for the poor and the outcast whose fellowship he sought out. We are given the Spirit for the poor and outcast whose fellowship is shunned by most of our society. Jesus was given the Spirit for the men and women who he called to follow him as disciples, ministers of the gospel. We are given the Spirit so that everyone of us might be a minister for Jesus.

And a voice is heard from heaven, “You, Holy Trinity ministers, are my beloved children, in whom I delight. Go, do as my beloved Son has done.”

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.