

New Beginnings

Scripture Reading: Mark 1: 4-11

How long have you been a minister? Clergy types get this question a lot. But you know what? So should you. So should you.

How long have you been a minister?

If this question has you scratching your head, if it confuses you, then you have company. Most churchgoers think of themselves as members, not ministers.

Now there are all sorts of reasons why this is the case, some of which are understandable and some regrettable. But here's the good news and God's honest truth: You are all ministers! You became a minister the same day Jesus did: at baptism.

At baptism, we are claimed by God and brought fully into the community of Christ. At baptism, God does with us what God did with Jesus at the Jordan. When we are baptized, God calls each of us "My child, Beloved," and then God sends the Holy Spirit upon us, commissioning us as ministers. Thus named and blessed, God then sends us forth into a world in great need of our particular God-given gifts and inclinations.

Don't misunderstand me here.

To say that we are commissioned as ministers at baptism is not to suggest that those who are not baptized have no ministry or that theirs is not blessed by God. That simply is not so.

Because of God's gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we have all been transformed by the Spirit. Transformed from followers of Jesus into ministers who continue and, yes, extend his ministry of love, compassion, and justice.

What I'm trying to suggest this morning is that when we look more closely at what God is doing in and through baptism, we begin to see that something enormously profound is occurring, something I think Christians throughout the ages have tended to overlook and undervalue.

Tot, teen, or full-blown adult, the day you and I are baptized something remarkable happens. The very same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism and animated his public ministry also alights on us. In addition to everything else that is happening when the Spirit comes to us as baptism, God uses this moment to fashion us into ministers.

Now whether you sensed the Spirit's touch at baptism, whether you felt authorized as a minister at that moment is another thing.

If you were still a babe in your parent's arms when you were baptized, unless you were the most spiritually sensitive of infants, you were oblivious to the Spirit's work in you.

And even if you were of voting age, you probably walked away with a wet forehead and heart full of gratitude but little of what Jesus was feeling as he waded back out of the river and onto the shore.

It can take years, even decades, for the Spirit's touch at baptism to be comprehended, trusted, and translated into ministry.

You've probably heard it said that churches are hospitals for sinners. Another common metaphor for the church is that of a family. The apostle Paul saw the church as Christ's mystical body and each of us has a particular function within that body.

Maybe my career in higher education colors how I see the church, but I love thinking of this community as a school, a college, for ministers.

Where besides school can you experiment and explore so freely? Where else can you try so many things on for size? Where else do you have permission to learn and grow, to fly and even flop?

When we're students, we take classes not simply because we must but because we can. We take risks. We develop relationships with people we would never otherwise meet and with whom we may never agree.

In school, we search for our own north star, even if we meander and lose our way a few times. And all the while, we are learning—about the world, about others, about ourselves, about what is possible when we open our minds, our hearts, and our lives to the grace and goodness of God.

When I say that for me church is like school, what I mean is that I think this is the perfect place to enter into a process of discovery about who we are and the ministry or ministries we were born to take up. Ministries that have been blessed and authorized from the very beginning, well before we discovered or developed them.

As with school, church can be the place to shine at something we're already good at. (Like the professional landscaper who gladly oversees the care of the church grounds.)

It's also a safe, supportive environment for taking on something we may have never tried before. (Like the parishioner with absolutely no experience in stewardship who discovers a real passion for helping folks think faithfully about their giving to the church.)

And as with school, church is an ideal setting for changing majors. (Like the long-time Sunday school teacher who decides he wants to try his hand at ministering among the homeless.)

If we want it to be, this church can be our campus. With one wonderful exception—here we don't need to worry about grades.

There are no grades here. But there is lots and lots of grace. Grace that does the unthinkable: through your baptism, it insists that even before you have taken your first step toward ministry, you are already God's beloved, God's child, one who is inherently pleasing to God.

When did your ministry begin? It began when God's Spirit touched you and commissioned you to do what Jesus did: to reveal the Good News of God's love for all in word and deed, discovering along the way what that means when it comes through you.

We become ministers the day the waters of baptism wash over us. Our ministries begin the day something inside dares to trust that God can, will, and wants to work through us just as surely as God worked through Jesus.

Let us pray: "Loving God, we can scarcely believe the scope of your grace that reaches out to us at baptism and every day of our lives. We praise you for your generosity and your open, loving arms. We thank you for blessing and authorizing our ministries—and before we've even begun.

Help us feel anew the freedom your grace imparts. Freedom to discover our gifts. Freedom to try things out. Freedom to find joy, satisfaction, and meaning in our ministries, regardless of outcome.

Thank you for our vocations as ministers and for giving us this place and this community in which to encounter, explore, and experiment with our Spirit-blessed ministries. Keep revealing how we are called to serve, and whom.

We thank and praise you as we follow in the way of our friend and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

The service continues with a renewal of baptism.