

PEOPLE PEOPLE
Sermon for Epiphany 3A- Mt 4:12-23
LPC, 1/26/14

With apologies to Tina Turner: what's baptism got to do with it?

If we're talking about what baptism means in the day-to-day life of a Christian, quite a lot, actually.

First, some background. For the past two weeks at Sunday worship we have heard stories about the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. As I've preached before, Jesus transforms the idea of baptism. Baptism was practiced by adherents of several religions long before Jesus came on the scene. The connotation of baptism in pre-Christian times was cleansing from sin.

Now along comes Jesus, the Son of God, to be baptized. If cleansing from sin is the reason for baptism, there's no earthly reason for Jesus, the sinless one, to be baptized. But Jesus makes old things new. Jesus is baptized not to demonstrate cleansing from sin, but, at least in part, to demonstrate the Father's call on his life.

And so are we. Christians come to be baptized, as tiny infants and consenting adults, as children who can speak for themselves as well as oldsters facing death, to demonstrate, at least in part, God's call on our lives.

If you are baptized, you are called by God. That's the easy part.

To what? That's the hard part. I was talking with a fellow spiritual director the other day and she said the question people most often bring to her is, "What is God's call on my life?"

Any Christian to whom faith is more than simple habit sooner or later comes to this question: "What is God's call on my life?" There is no question but that God calls every one of God's children to something.

God's call on the life of all God's children is informed by Bible stories of Jesus calling his disciples, one of which we heard last week from the Gospel of John, and another of which we heard this morning, from the Gospel of Matthew.

In this version, Jesus is walking along the Sea of Galilee observing fishermen at work. He calls four of them, two sets of brothers: Peter and Andrew and James and John. What he says to them is "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And, oddly, they do, no questions asked. James and John even leave their old dad in the lurch.

The immediacy of the reaction of these four men surprises us modern people. What a compelling person Jesus must have been! How extraordinary these first disciples must have been – to leave everything and follow Jesus!

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

The interesting thing to me is the unusual language Jesus uses: “Follow me and become fishermen of humans.” This strange phrase is usually interpreted in a strictly evangelical sense: that the first disciples are called to convert everyone to Christianity. That is one possible interpretation. I think there’s a subtler undercurrent though.

Jesus is talking to fishermen. These men know fishing. Jesus is calling them to do what they already are doing, but to do it for other people. Think of what that might mean for us today.

It is more than possible that God’s call on our lives is not to do anything terribly difficult or extraordinary, but to do what we already do, *for people*. This interpretation is consistent with what Jesus describes as the great commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” This interpretation is also consistent with the whole Bible, Old and New Testament, which describes God’s covenant relationship with humankind, calling people into deeper relationship with Godself and with other people.

Here is a potentially fruitful exercise for all of us baptized modern people. Start with the cocktail-party question that people who don’t know each other use to open a conversation: “What do you do?”

What do you do? To answer, “I’m retired,” in this instance is not acceptable. Even if you are retired, you do something. You can say, “I read,” or “I garden,” or “I grandparent.” To answer with a long string of explanatory words is also not acceptable and reeks of bureaucracy. See if you can reduce what you do to a word or two. A doctor, nurse or therapist can say, “I heal.” A consultant can say, “I assist,” or “I clarify.”

Now, see if you can add the word “people” or “for people” at the end of what you do. For example, “I heal people,” “I clarify for people,” “I advocate for people,” “I grandparent people,” “I paint for people,” “I bag groceries for people.” Whatever you do think of doing it for the benefit for, or on behalf of, or in the interests of, other people.

If you can’t imagine framing what you do in those terms, you *may* have to change something to bring your life into line with your baptism. On the other hand, chances are good that if you are doing something you love, there is something of God in it. Anything that brings you true joy and deep fulfillment is surely part of how *God wants to give you as a gift to the world*.

Now, the matter calls for discernment. I am not talking about things that are merely gratifying. I am talking about things that are soul-feeding. What is soul-feeding draws us to God. What is ego-feeding tends to draw us away from God.

What is God’s call on your life? Only you can answer that. What do you do now? Can you do it for God? Can you do it for people?