

Baptism: Anointing, Holy Spirit and Calling

Luke 4:16-19, John 20:19-23

At baptism I lay hands on the ones being baptized as they come up out of the water. I offer them a prayer that is both blessing and commissioning. Why?

I

Baptism means anointing, and anointing stands for the presence of the Spirit of God in the life of the one being baptized.

At Jesus' baptism the Spirit descended as a dove, and Jesus heard God call him to his mission as God's son in the world.

In ancient Israel the king was anointed with oil to be God's son, God's kingly representative in the nation. In the kingdom of God Jesus preached, *everyone* is anointed, called and Spirit-empowered to be God's daughters and sons in the world.

In some Christian traditions anointing with oil is part of the sacred ceremony of baptism. Awhile back there was a movie called, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. In it a handsome young man falls in love with a Greek girl and agrees, as part of his marriage commitment, to convert to her Greek Orthodox faith and be baptized.

The Orthodox priest at her church is used to baptizing infants, and the baptismal font is way too small, so he drags in a plastic backyard baby pool into the sanctuary for the baptismal service. The groom-to-be stands naked except for his bathing suit ankle deep in the pool.

Usually in the ceremony the godmother anoints the infant with oil. In this case the sister-in-law gladly volunteers to be the godmother and anoints his body with oil. Starting with his chest she rubs oil over his body, and one gets the impression she is enjoying this ceremony just a little too much!

In the New Testament church the laying on of hands was used to signify the giving of the Spirit at baptism. In early Baptist life the laying on of hands accompanied baptism, and I, in my ministry, have revived this practice.

II

Baptism is, therefore, the ordination of all believers to be ministers of the gospel of Christ. At baptism you are ordained to be emissaries of the kingdom of God.

Ordination is not just for clergy and deacons; all Christians receive the laying on of hands. We are all called and anointed to be priests to one another, vessels of the grace of God to all people. *Baptism is ordination.*

III

The Spirit of God calls, gifts and empowers us in our ministries. In John 20, on Easter evening, the Risen Christ appears to his disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors. “Peace be with you”, he said to them, then again, “Peace be with you”, because they, like us, need to hear these words over and over again.

Then he said, “As the Father has sent me, so send I you”. As Jesus was sent into the world as God’s son, so we, daughters and sons of God, are sent. The Greek word “sent” means “to apostle”. To be an apostle is to be “one sent”, sent by God to be part of God’s mission of love in the world. So Jesus here “apostled” them, and now Jesus now “apostles” us.

We, of course, cannot be apostles of God unless we have God’s Spirit in us. So, with his next breath Jesus “breathed on them” and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”.

What God sends and calls you to do, God gifts and empowers you to do. Living your baptism, then, means to be attentive to what the Spirit of God is calling and gifting you to do.

IV

Every Christian has a calling, a vocation, a mission, a life lived in partnership with God and God’s purposes in the world.

In the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther gave us a revolutionary new way to understand *vocation*. In his day the only ones with a “vocation” were the priests, nuns and monks. But Luther said we all have a vocation. He said, famously, that a cobbler making shoes serves God as much as monk saying his prayers. (And if they were failures at making shoes, they became preachers! Just kidding.)

This theology of vocation had its limitations and problems in that period of time. It was too tied to one’s “station” in life, the circumstances of one’s birth. Most cobblers were cobblers because their fathers were cobblers. If you grew up in an educated home, you were likely to become a priest or lawyer or teacher. And women had very few options for their vocation.

The Yale theologian Miroslav Volf has reworked the old doctrine of vocation and places it under the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. God calls us by the Spirit, and these callings are not bound by where and how you were born.¹

Moreover, this also means that the Spirit can call us to different places of ministry and mission at different seasons of our lives. It’s not as if God calls us to do one thing, *be* one thing all our lives, and if we miss it, we have missed it forever. God is more creative and life is more dynamic than that.

One's deepest calling is at the level of being. That is, becoming the person God created you to be. In the second century, the theologian Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” God wants us to *live* with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Thomas Merton, reflecting on being a saint, said: “For me to be a saint means to be myself.”² Sainthood is what God intends for everyone, not just the ones who end up in stained glass windows.

To be a saint is to be your truest self. The spiritual quest is to put away the false self, or selves, and to connect more and more deeply with your truest self.

This may not happen quickly. The poet May Sarton wrote:

Now I have become myself. It's taken

Time, many years and places;

I've been dissolved and shaken,

Worn other people's faces.³

Your calling is a combination of D.N.A., life experience and the Spirit of God. And as for the Spirit of God, it's not always like a gentle dove. The Celtic Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit is the Wild Goose, leading us out to where God wants us to go and where we most need to go—and to be what we most need to be.

Frederick Buechner and Parker Palmer both say that our quest for our calling begins by *listening to your life*.

So, Buechner says that God calls us to the meeting place of our greatest joy, or hunger, on the one hand, and the world's great need on the other. We look deeply at our own joys and hungers, and we look at the needs of the world around us. Where they meet is where God is calling us.⁴

Parker Palmer says that we need to know and experience “the rapture of being alive”, but that is not enough! The spiritual quest is to know that rapture, then “to allow that knowledge to transform us into celebrants, advocates and defenders of life wherever we find it.”⁵

Which leads to the next point.

VI

Our calling always is connected to the needs of the world around us. When Jesus returned to his home town in Nazareth he preached his inaugural sermon in the local synagogue. He read from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
 because he has anointed me
 to preach good news to the poor
 release to the captives and

the recovery of sight to the blind
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of God's favor.

And to put a punctuation point on it, he said, That day is now!

As the Spirit anoints us we are sent to comfort, heal and set free. Who are the poor around us here? The blind, the broken-hearted, the ones in one kind of prison or another? The Spirit anoints us and sends us there.

VII

Your calling is more, then, than your job, though it may include your job. It is your life-work. It is the unique way you offer your best gifts to the world. Art, mothering and fathering, teaching, hammering, writing, serving, helping. These are the beautiful things you do, paid or unpaid, which are at the heart of who you are.

VIII

Calling is discerned not only as you go deep into yourselves but also in community.

In community we learn more deeply who we are. In community people see our gifts in ways we may not yet see. In community we are encouraged along our

path. Who in your life has planted the seed that became your vocation, your calling?

A fundamental purpose of the church, then, is to *sponsor each other in our callings*. We help each other identify our gifts and then encourage each other in the development of these gifts.

IX

It's never too late. Too late, that is, to rekindle the gift of the Spirit, to discover your calling for this time in your life. Paul says, "Rekindle the gift of God which is yours through the laying on of hands." He was speaking of the Holy Spirit. Then he added, "For God has not given you a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and a wise mind.' (II Timothy 1:6-7).

So, don't shrink back. Be brave! And go forth with power and love to be and to do what God is, even now, calling your to be and to do.

X

As I baptize people, they go under the water then up and out again. They stand there dripping wet. I help them wipe the water from their eyes. Then, as we look at each other, I lay my hands on their heads and offer this prayer, both a blessing and a commissioning:

You are God's beloved,
called by the Spirit
to be a minister of Christ.

May the Lord bless and keep you,
may the Lord make his face
to shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you.
and through *you*
give the world *peace*.

1. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1991).
2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (N.Y.: A New Directions Book, 1986), p.26
3. May Sarton, "Now I Have Become Myself", *Selected Poems of May Sarton* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), p.191
4. Buechner says this in various writings. One of them is *Wishful Thinking* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1973), p.95

5. From Palmer's book, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (Jossey-Bass, 1999). The phrase, "The rapture of being alive" is from Joseph Cambell.