



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
THE GENERAL CONVENTION

BONNIE ANDERSON, D.D.
PRESIDENT OF THE HOUSE OF DEPUTIES

First Sunday after the Epiphany
Baptism of our Lord
January 11, 2009
Falls Church (Episcopal)
Diocese of Virginia
Sermon – Bonnie Anderson

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, in the Gospel reading from Mark, we witness the baptism of Jesus. Through centuries of writing and oral history, we “take part in” the baptism of Jesus through our own baptism. Time and time again, the story of this landmark event is told and read and the story of long ago becomes our own story, our own experience. It is a thread of Christian life that binds us to God, to Jesus incarnate and to each other. Baptism is a life line for the Holy people of God.

Fredrica Harris Thompsett, known scholar, active lay woman and retired Episcopal Divinity School professor has said, “Theologically it is important to recall that in baptism, as in creation, we are bearing Gods energy and spirit. Baptism is not simply or only an individual decision; it is primarily about God acting and the community of faith responding. It is Gods doing that calls forth our responsiveness. Baptism is an expression of Gods hope for a people: created, chosen, and adopted anew as God's own.”¹

Each time we repeat our baptismal vows in the words of the baptismal covenant, we make promises to God and to each other. Once we are marked as Christ's own forever, through baptism, we spend the rest of our lives trying to understand how to keep the baptismal promises. For you see, if we don't mean what we say in our Baptismal vows, in the sacrament of baptism, then it really doesn't matter what we say at all.

So what is it that we **do** promise in our baptismal covenant?
We make 5 promises. And after each promise we say, “I will with God's help”.

¹ Anglican Theological Review, *Baptismal Living: Steadfast Covenant of Hope*. Winter, 2004.



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We promise:

1. To continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.
2. To persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.
3. Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
4. Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.
5. Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.²

We make these promises in the context of Christian community. We promise to ask God for help all along the way and these promises bind us to each other, to God and to all the members of our Christian family who have gone before us.

The baptized are called to act. The promises are "action" promises. "I will...."

All of us make these promises when we renew our baptismal vows. All of us, laity, priests, bishops, deacons make these promises.

I would like to focus on the ministry of the laity. Our wise sister, Verna Dozier, often called the laity the "sleeping giant". The largest "order" of ministers in our church is also the group who often sits passively by and waits for the priests, deacons or bishops to do it all. Let the sleeping giant sleep, so to speak. So what is our job, what can we, the lay people of the church, do?

The answer is, "lay people can do everything except administer the sacraments". And the ministry of the laity is not done just "in Church". We get our authority from our baptism. Our marching orders are pretty well spelled out in the Catechism.

The Catechism, found in our Book of Common Prayer gives us direction to do our ministry.

Who are the ministers of the Church?

The ministers of the Church are the lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.

Note that lay persons are MINISTERS of the church along with bishops, priests and deacons. We are "ordained" into the community of Christ and marked as Christ's own forever by our baptism. We are

² Book of Common Prayer, p. 417.



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called to the ministry of the laity first and some of us continue to be called again and again into that ministry of the laity.

What is the ministry of the laity?

The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer tells us that too.

The ministry of the lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.³

It says it, right there on page 855. And you know what? I believe it. This description of the ministry of the laity is enticing. It tells us that, as a lay person, we have important reconciliation work to do in the name of Jesus and it assumes that we have the gifts to do the work. It tells us we have a place with the priests and bishops and deacons and that our ministry is just as important and needed and significant as theirs. It also tells us that we have responsibilities and that we can't just sit back and watch while the priests and deacons and bishops do all the work.

So what keeps us from fulfilling our baptismal promises? What keeps lay people from doing what we are called to do?

The overarching obstacle was summed up by Loren Mead when he said,

“The problem is not simply one of programs or processes. Rather, it is a systemic issue. Anything we do to enhance lay ministry causes a reaction in the system that negates what we do,” he contended. “The system is self-correcting. And it self-corrects back to the same old clergy-centered sense of ministry that we are trying to get away from.”⁴

Well, I think God is working **on** us in a new way. I think God is working **with** us in a new way. I think God is working **in** us in a new way.

³ Book of Common Prayer, p. 855.

⁴ Mead, Loren. *LayNet*, Winter 2004 (Vol. 15, No. 1), 7.



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Here is how I think God is working: In the midst of turmoil and strife in our Church in the last few years, instead of falling into depressed defeat when some in The Episcopal Church choose to leave, instead of quietly walking away, Episcopalians in dioceses and congregations are bearing witness to Christ wherever they may be. According to the gifts given them, they are carrying on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. They are taking their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church. Episcopalians are using their gifts in new ways, to begin new ministries to be "reborn". Make no mistake about it, the Holy Spirit is at work.

Let me give you a few examples:

The Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin has been reconstituted – "reborn" if you will and by far, the perseverance, creativity, gumption and down right faith of the laity is the reason they have moved from a diocese of oppressed laity and a minority of oppressed clergy to a diocese of people with strength and renewed commitment to Christ. The Episcopal clergy now know each other, they smile at each other and work together. The lay people are getting to know each other, across boundaries of congregations. They like each other, they pray together and for each other. They like the clergy and the clergy like them. The appointed bishop likes them, calls upon them, counsels with them. They call upon him, like him counsel with him. Together they have started new congregations populated in part by new Episcopalians. They have new outreach and new mission work.

Are Episcopalians "born again"? Ask Episcopalians in the Diocese of San Joaquin. Ask the same question of Episcopalians in the Diocese of Fort Worth, Pittsburgh, Rio Grande. Ask yourselves. Are you being "born again"? Are you new and renewed? How is God working in our life? God is doing something new with us.

Is God giving us a new opportunity to reevaluate our expectations of each other and redefine how we keep our baptismal promises?

Are we being asked to adjust our expectations of each other?

Lay person Kathryn Palen writes in her article, A Ministry for All:

"Clergy have expectations of themselves: I should be good at everything. Since I'm the professional, I'm ultimately responsible. I'm needed by people, so I can't disappoint them. If I opt not to do certain things, perhaps others will think I'm lazy. Laity have expectations of clergy: They are the ones who do "real"



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ministry. They have the skills and knowledge to handle every situation. They somehow are different, so we can expect more of them than we do of ourselves. Laypeople's expectations of themselves run from being "just" a layperson to being the judge of a clergyperson's ministry. Clergy may expect laypeople to be administrative leaders, organizational volunteers, personal supporters, or needy spectators. Until congregations help their members—clergy and lay—explore and renegotiate their expectations in healthy and liberating ways, those expectations will continue to serve as an obstacle to the ministry of all."⁵

So when do we do all this? When do we change the system to encourage and celebrate the ministries of all the baptized? When do we use our gifts together, affirming each other, holding each other accountable, being clear about our ministry and willing to take risks to make it happen? When do we wake up the sleeping giant?

When? Now. Is it hard, painful, risky work? You bet. But the strife and pain that many have experienced in our Church over the last few years is yielding unexpected blessings.

God has given us Jesus and we have witnessed his baptism through the scripture. We are bound to him and to each other through baptism.

And dear people of God, remember always, when the going gets tough and even when the going is easy, God is with us. After all, God is with us so intimately that God knows how many hairs are on our head, for heaven's sake. God keeps us under the shadow of his wing. And to remind us that God is always with us, God has given us each other.

Amen.

⁵ Palen, Kathryn. "*A Ministry for All*" (Alban Institute, Congregations, 2004-10-01)