

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, otherwise known as the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. As such, I think it's appropriate to discuss the importance of baptism in our lives.

First, what exactly is baptism? Our catechism has about as good of a definition as any: Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. In short, baptism is the point at which we become official members of the family of God.

Have you ever thought about the importance of that act of being baptized? Through that act every baptized Christian has been made a member of the family of God. But what does it mean to be a member of the family of God?

As a member of any family, we are entitled to a few things – mainly food, shelter and clothing. At St. Luke's we are fed with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. Here we can find shelter from a chaotic and hectic world as we lose ourselves in the liturgy and prayers. And we are being clothed with scriptural and ecclesial knowledge of what it takes to live a life of daily discipleship. But those three things – food, shelter and clothing – are the bare minimum of being part of a family.

A new baby doesn't stay new forever. It learns to walk and talk. It gets instilled with particular values of a particular family. It grows and it learns. At some point it is given responsibilities to help the family run smoothly. The child develops skills and traits that it can use to add depth to the family. My immediate family has been blessed by artistic and musical daughters who have added that dimension to our life. Some have cooked. All have had to clean. That is all part of being a family.

So how does this analogy carry over into the Church? We are adopted into the family of God through our baptism. Upon our adoption we are fed, sheltered and clothed. But we must ask how long do we allow ourselves to simply sit and passively receive that food, shelter and clothing? At some point we need to realize that we are growing up. At some point we need to understand that the family, the Church, does not function properly if we do not actively contribute.

As we grow we develop skills and traits that can be added to the mix of family life. Those gifts are to be used for the benefit of the Church and the kingdom of God. In short, we present to God, from the gifts he has given us, ourselves, our souls and bodies as a living sacrifice to God. We are called, through our baptism, to be active ministers of the Church.

It is through the power of baptism that you are cleansed from sin, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. It is through baptism that we confess the faith, proclaim the resurrection and share in Christ's eternal priesthood. It is through baptism that we become ministers.

What makes ministers of the Church isn't ordination, or a collar, or a stole, or a crozier or miter; what makes a minister of the Church is baptism. You all, by virtue of your baptism, share in the priesthood of Christ. You all, by virtue of your baptism, are ministers of the Church. And to stress who the ministers of the Church are, the catechism says that they are lay people, bishops, priests and deacons. Lay people are the first ministers of the Church. Baptism – yours and mine – is the foundation of ministry.

Through our baptism we have been adopted into the family of God. Very few of us here are newly baptized. As any child who gets older is given greater responsibilities in the life of a family, so too do we need to take greater responsibility in the life of this family.

I am NOT saying that St. Luke's is a parish full of benchwarmers, because I don't believe that for a second. What I am saying is that maybe it's time to think about things differently. Maybe it's time to begin thinking about church not as just one of many parts to your life, but to begin seeing the Church as the vehicle that allows you to proclaim the faith, and the vehicle that allows you to see yourself as a minister of the Gospel.

We are entering the season of the Epiphany – that time when we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the world. This might be the time to spend some time in prayer and discernment and ask, “How is Christ made manifest in me? How might I help proclaim the message of the Gospel? What might I do to benefit this family of God?”

Prayer means asking yourself those questions and listening to God. Discernment means asking others those questions and listening to God through them.

On this Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, let us be willing to see the Church as a place where we were adopted and commissioned as ministers of the Gospel – not just simply a place where we are fed, sheltered and clothed. Let us remember that, like Jesus, baptism is not an end but a beginning. Let us remember that the health and welfare of the body is determined by how active its members are.

And finally, on this Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, let us remember that the Holy Spirit descended upon us also at our own baptism and God said, “With you I am well pleased.”

Amen.

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