
“What Are We Doing Here?” – A Reflection on the Shaping of Our Baptismal Identity

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
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What are we doing here?

Baptisms, yes, but what are we baptizing these children into?

I mean ... we were up and out of the house this morning before our neighbors had poured their first cup of coffee. We put on our chosen clothes. We drove across town to the Cathedral. We walked by the plaque that declares this place to be a House of Prayer for All People and we stepped into sacred space that is framed by stained glass and filled with solemn silence and song. And then, without warning, people all around us start speaking in languages that seem foreign to us.

I know you're wondering ... what are we doing here?

If we were to go around town and ask people what they think we're doing in church, we'd hear a variety of answers. Some would say we're like a community service agency, here to help those who can't help themselves. Others might see us as a place for moral or political advocacy—a group of reformers trying to change the social, economic, and political systems of the world to make them more just. Still others would say we remind them of a family, a support network to provide comfort and fellowship for those who belong. There are those who would say we're like a club, where people can come to enjoy common interests and traditions—like a spiritual version of the Bobby Jones Golf Course, just with fewer tees and better music.

None of these images quite captures what's happening here, though.

Let's look back to the Pentecost story that we just read from the second chapter of Acts.

A group of disciples huddled together in one place, not entirely sure what to do next. You'll notice that they aren't drafting a strategic plan or sharpening their church planting skills. Jesus had told them to wait—to wait for a gift, for power from on high—but they didn't know what it might look like. And then, suddenly, the sound of wind fills the house, fire lights on each of the disciples, and they hear themselves talking to people they didn't know before and seeming to make sense. People from every nation under heaven hear and understand what is being said. The moment confuses them. Some think it's a party gone too far — “they're drunk!” they say.

But Peter—Peter, who just weeks ago had denied even knowing Jesus—stands up. Something in him has changed. He is animated by an energy that is not his own. He looks at this chaos in the street through the lenses of his experience of being with Jesus and he sees something others don't. He sees good trouble. In his wisdom, he recognizes that this isn't madness or drunkenness—this is the Spirit of God. This is what the prophet Joel spoke of.

This is God acting.

And that's what's different about church.

In each of the other images that people have of what church might be like, the people are in control. At their best, they are good people doing good things for good reasons. But, in the end, the people determine where the group will go and how to get there.

Church, at its best, is a place where God is in control. It's not that we wouldn't rather do it ourselves. We would. But we have committed ourselves to look to God to determine where to go and how to get there.

Some call this difference the great reversal.

The Book of Common Prayer Catechism describes the mission of the Church as "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

We are about healing and reconciliation.

We have that mission because we understand it to be God's mission.

Robert Gallagher, an Episcopal Priest and well-known consultant and trainer in religious systems, names three core purposes of church that flow from this mission: worship, formation, and service.

Worship is our response to God's initiating love. It's not about what we like or dislike. It's about showing up in reverence and gratitude, recognizing we are not the center of the universe—and we don't have to be.

Formation is how we grow in that awareness. We're shaped by Scripture, by the sacraments, by prayer, and by community. We learn how to see like Peter, to recognize the Spirit at work and discern how we can join in.

And service is the natural outflow. We don't serve to prove ourselves worthy of anything, but as a response to the Spirit's presence. We join God's work in the world—not with anxiety or ego, but with joy and humility.

We often face a challenge when living into these purposes that, if we examine it, tells us something important about the rhythm of life they are calling us into.

We tend to think of service as the most important thing that we do. As Archbishop William Temple famously said, "The Church is the only organization that exists primarily for the benefit for those who are not its members." That may be, but when we forget that worship and formation are the primary tasks of the church, we don't give God the time to develop an inquiring and discerning heart within us. Without the heart, our minds fall short of discerning what to do or how to do it. We'll wind up doing things for people without ever being with them.

Just think of how we talk about the baptismal covenant. You would not be alone if the only part you could remember without looking at the prayer book is the injunction to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. Yet, our ability to fulfill that goal is dependent on our having been shaped by the baptismal life described in the previous questions. Without the heart, our striving slips into burnout because we were expecting gratitude that we didn't receive and our looking again (which is what respect means) becomes more anxious because we don't know what we are looking for. Dignity looks more like conformity than reality.

Christian service only bears good fruit when it flows from a rhythm of rest, prayer, and communion with God.

When we begin with sabbath – when we start by resting in God's love—we serve differently. We don't have to fix everything. We're not trying to impress anyone. Our service becomes spacious, humble, and attentive. It flows from the inside out.

It's the same rhythm we see in Jesus: retreat and return. Rest and engagement. Silence and speech. This is the rhythm of the Spirit-filled life.

So, are we any closer to knowing what are we doing here?

My answer is that we are here to cultivate a way of life that is shaped by this rhythm of sabbath and service—a rhythm that grounds us in God's presence and sends us into the world not with anxiety or ego, but with attentiveness and grace.

I can't always explain it, but I know it when I see it!

It looks like this: an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love the Lord, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.

This, of course, is the prayer we will pray over the newly baptized in just a minute. It's a beautiful rendering of the soul that we hope God will shape in them ... and in us.

So if someone asks you, "What are you doing in church?—you might say:

"I'm learning to see. I'm learning to listen. I'm learning to serve from a deeper place. I'm asking for an inquiring and discerning heart."

That's what we're doing here.

I want to leave you with a prayer that captures the essence of what I have trying to say.

Let us pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come as the wind and cleanse,

come as the fire and burn,

come as the light and reveal,

convict, convert, consecrate,

until we are wholly yours.

Amen.