

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 15, 2006

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The baptism of Jesus in the gospel (Mark 1:1f.) helps us to understand our own baptisms. Jesus rose from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the Father's voice declared, "You are my beloved Son."

Our baptisms follow this same pattern. The water of baptism is an outward sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit, through which we become children of God. As Romans says, "You received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out Abba, Father" (8:15).

Jesus is God's eternally begotten Son. In baptism, we become God's adopted children.

Jesus' baptism was the beginning of his ministry. The Spirit descended upon him and led him to do the things the Father called him to do. St. Peter describes it this way in Acts: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all those who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38).

As children of God, we are also called to ministry. We are no longer children of Adam and Eve, stuck in patterns of sin and futility, which lead to death. We have been born again as children of God. We are led by the Spirit to serve God with our gifts as we move towards our destiny of resurrection and eternal life.

Now, we often forget that we are children of God. We get caught up in the hustle and distractions of life. We face temptation and come to be led by the world, the flesh and the devil rather than the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me"

We come to church to remember that we have the privilege of boldly calling God, "Father"; to remember that we are members incorporate in the body of Christ and heirs of the kingdom. We leave the altar to "Do all such good works as [God] has prepared for us to walk in."

The good works that God has called us to walk in relate to the discussion of gifts in the epistle (Romans 12:6f.). Romans says, "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us." The gifts we have are a consequence of the grace that has been given through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament teaches us that every Christian has at least one spiritual gift to use in service for Christ. 1 Corinthians says, "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all" (12:7). A spiritual gift is a talent or ability that God gives you to use for the benefit of others and to further the work of salvation in the world.

A spiritual gift is something you can do without needing anything from others in return, as Jesus gave himself for us on the cross without needing anything from us. However, while spiritual gifts do not need the approval of others, our possession of a gift is confirmed by the fact that other people are edified by our exercise of it.

The church cannot fulfill its vocation unless its members are faithful in the use of their gifts. Being a Christian is not just about being forgiven and having the promise of eternal life. Being a Christian is also about having work to do for Christ.

We forget that we are children of God when we live a passive Christian life. When we call ourselves Christians but do not do the things God calls us to do, we follow the way of the world by default.

Jesus was not passive. He was committed to a life of prayer. He made the world change to accommodate his presence and message. We, too, must commit ourselves to prayer and to using our gifts to serve others and change the world around us. Active service is the way we discover the purpose of our lives in Christ.

The epistle gives a sampling of spiritual gifts: Prophecy, which is the inspired proclamation of God's word. Ministry, which means service—doing things for the benefit of others. Teaching, which is the ability to communicate truth. Exhortation (a word used elsewhere for the ministry of the Holy Spirit), which is the ability to strengthen and comfort people when they are discouraged. Giving is the special ability some have to be generous with their resources to aid the gospel and help the needy. Ruling, which is the ability to govern an area of ministry. And mercy, which is the ability to communicate God's love to those who are afflicted.

These and other gifts are exercised by Christians as they go about the business of life. Sometimes gifts are exercised at church. But most ministry takes place in the office, at the store, in the home or during recreation. Some people think of the church building as the church. This is wrong. The church is the body of Christ. You are a member of the body. Thus, wherever you are, the church is present to carry out the ministry.

We have begun to talk about building Phase II of our church. Building the church is not primarily about buildings. It is about expanding ministry in such a way that more space is needed to carry it out. As Ephesians 4:16 says (in the GNB) "When each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love."

The season of Epiphany is about the ways Christ is revealed as the Son of God. It is also about the implications of that revelation in our lives. Today, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God in his baptism. He rose from the water and went about doing the things he was called to do as God's Son. We come to the altar to remember that we were made children of God in baptism. We leave the altar with the vocation to serve with the gift of grace we have been given.