

Baptizing Babies and Burying Old Folks

In the fall of 1979, I left a lucrative career in the insurance business and went to seminary. My father, angry with my decision (he later got over it), growled in disgust, “You’ll waste your whole life baptizing babies and burying old folks.” Ironically, baptizing babies and burying old folks are two of my favorite pastoral duties. But then I can think of few pastoral chores that I don’t like.

Before making the decision to go to seminary, I went to visit the Presbyterian pastor who performed my marriage ceremony. I asked him, “What do you like best about being a minister?” He said, “First, I like being my own boss. Second, I like working with people in significant ways. And third, I like mediating the presence of God.” For the next hour, he unpacked those three statements. Near the end of our session, he said with great enthusiasm, “I can’t believe I get paid to do this job!”

Like that Presbyterian pastor, I can’t believe my good fortune. I actually get paid to lead the church, proclaim the gospel, administer the sacraments, and care for people. Although ministers often complain about high stress and low salaries, most of us love our vocation. In fact, recent studies reveal that clergy are more satisfied with their profession than any other group in America.

I’m no Pollyanna about pastoral ministry. For example, I am painfully aware of the inevitable criticism that comes with this job. Just a few months ago, a fundamentalist member of our church left the congregation, accusing me of “not preaching the word.” But the very next Sunday, I got to lead worship, preach a sermon, and celebrate Holy Communion. And after worship, a little girl I baptized five years earlier gave me a hug and handed me a picture she had drawn for me. At the bottom of the picture she wrote, “Pastor Martin, I love you.”

Last Sunday our church celebrated confirmation. After confirming our young people, we invited the congregation to renew their baptism vows. Large numbers of people made their way to the baptism font. I put my thumb into the baptismal water, made the sign of the cross on their foreheads and said, “Remember that you are baptized, and be a faithful follower of Christ.” Some of the foreheads were young, soft, and smooth. Others were old, wrinkled, and tough. Some who came forward had recently lost a spouse, were going through a divorce, or were battling cancer. Others had recently received a promotion, gotten married, or were expecting a child. Some smiled and some cried. All came in an act of loyalty, renewal, and faith. No doubt, some of our members will live out their renewed baptism vows more faithfully than others. But all of them are beloved children of God, and I have the incredible privilege of being their pastor. It’s a gift from God for which I am daily grateful.

Several months ago I had my annual consultation with my district superintendent to discuss next year’s appointment (one of the few things I don’t like about my job!). During our session he asked me, “What motivates you to be in ministry?” I replied, “I’m called to it. I’m gifted for it. I’m educated in it. And I absolutely love doing it. I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

Originally published in Circuit Rider Feb/Mar/April 2009 © Circuit Rider.