

During the Great Fifty Days between the feasts of Easter and Pentecost, the first readings each Sunday are stories of God working in mighty ways in the early Christian community. In these stories, we see God choosing to act in ways that break open boxes and categories that we humans have used to divide and identify people for generations.

The Christian faith, which started as a movement among Jews, opened itself to the participation of Gentiles. In a male-dominated society, favorable consideration was given (for what seems to be the first time) to women. Economic status? If anything, that early Christian church turned the tables, giving *preference* to the poor, not just “scraps from the table.” As Paul would later put it, “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, all are one in Christ Jesus.”

Of course, I have to admit, as I read these stories, I find myself more than a little jealous that Peter can be so effective so quickly. I mean...think back to what we read just a couple of weeks ago: just *one* of Peter’s sermons (and a pretty sketchy one at that) is enough to lead to the baptism of *hundreds* in the crowd. I consider myself lucky if *just one person* leaving after the service even bothers to *mention* the sermon much less actually *do something* as a result of hearing it.

Bishop’s Committees may wonder what they could do to get members to bring even a *slightly* larger portion of what they possess (much less everything!) for the sake of the parish’s ministry – but in Acts, with seemingly no trouble at all, folks come in and lay everything they’ve got at the apostles’ feet. It can be tempting for us to ask: What is preventing this kind of faithful response in our day and age? Why is it so hard to find such whole-hearted commitment, such eager discipleship, even among those who are clearly active members?

Surf on the Internet, subscribe to any professional journal or news magazine, turn on any talk radio program or TV interviewer and you will find yourself drowning in theories about why Western civilization is less religious than it could be. The wise and the not-so-wise publish explanations that range from the 21st century version of the stars being aligned badly, to the evils of TV, to the “political agenda” of this or that interest group.

Those who specifically study church culture suggest “new music” as a culprit – or *old* music, traditional language, contemporary language, fundamentalism, relativism. Almost without exception, the “problem” (however that particular author defines it) is caused by

someone *else's* behavior and, therefore, the "solution" depends on someone *else* changing that behavior.

What seems to be very thin on the ground are books, studies, articles...and sermons...that ask the question the Ethiopian eunuch asks in this morning's first reading: ***"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"*** Or, given the fact that most of us already *are* baptized, a variation on that question: ***"What is to prevent me from living the life into which I've been baptized?"***

"What is to prevent *me* from living as one baptized?" The question, my dear sisters and brothers, is not why *other* people don't bring everything *they* possess and lay it at the feet of the apostles; it is: ***Why don't I do that?*** The question isn't why our grown children and grandchildren are not attending church; it is: ***Why am I only going through the motions?*** The question isn't why Peter was so successful in attracting others to the way of Christ; it is: ***Why am I unwilling to talk to my neighbors and friends about my faith?***

The Ethiopian eunuch – an outsider if there ever were one: a Gentile, a mutilated (and, therefore, unclean) man, a foreigner – asks a question that should be on the lips of every already-baptized Christian every morning: ***What is to prevent me from being baptized? What is to prevent me from living the life into which I've been baptized?***

Although I am dancing along the edges of doctrine in saying this, I would submit to you that baptism is not a magical event that happens once and forever and thereafter requires nothing more from us. Baptism is a *continuously unfolding* way of being with God *right now*, this very minute, in the midst of the decision I am making, the conversation I am having, the prayer I am offering.

Baptism is not something that has been done *to* us over which we have no control and for which we have no responsibility. Instead, it is a visible and sacramental reminder that God's grace is pouring into creation *every day* in an unending stream. Baptism provides the guiding principles by which we make the choice *each and every day* whether to stand in God's abundant flow of holiness...or not.

So, what is it about my life in the community in which I live today that encourages me to choose something (anything) other than God's way? Why and how do I prevent myself from being transformed by the living water of God's flood of grace, from "being baptized"? I don't know if my experience mirrors yours, but I will offer three personal reflections in the hope that they might spark a question or an epiphany for you.

The first thing that interferes with deep discipleship is **my comfort with a sacred-**

secular dualism. When I sort out my decisions into “the ones about God” and “the ones about ‘real life’,” I can keep most of my existence out of my relationship with God. Money, politics, ecology, power, possessions, prejudice, and relationships with family, friends, strangers and enemies all can very easily go into the “real life” category, as if God had no claim on them. This means I don’t ever need to consider the challenges of my faith covenant in the bank, the voting booth, my workplace, or the mall.

As I look at all these areas of my life, ***what is to prevent me from being baptized? What is to prevent me from living the life into which I’ve been baptized?***

The second thing is **my fear**. When I choose to give my life over to all the ways the world offers me (indeed, *urges* me) to be afraid, I can effectively shut out God’s voice. Conversely, when I breathe deeply, my body literally cannot produce the necessary adrenaline to catapult me into “fight or flight.” I don’t think it is a coincidence that the word for “Spirit” and the word for “breath” are the same in both Greek *and* Hebrew. When I breathe deeply, I in-spire the Holy Spirit who guides me toward the freedom to love – which includes manifesting (embodying!) generosity, compassion, flexibility, joy, humor, and perspective. I become the “new creature” that God promised, reflecting God’s own image more clearly.

Again, I’m called to ask myself, when it comes to my fears, ***what is to prevent me from being baptized? What is to prevent me from living the life into which I’ve been baptized?***

The third thing is **my pride**. When I cannot admit that I don’t know it all, control it all, or that I am not always right, I shut myself off from the blessing of the stranger who asks me the startling and life-altering question I need to wrestle with.

Our faith story tells us that God is *always* at work, calling us to see God not only in the people and situations *you and I* recognize as holy, but those who are the “Ethiopian eunuchs” in our midst. By many strange and mysterious paths, our journeys cross by the edge of a river and sometimes, in a moment of sheer grace, we discover that there is *nothing* to prevent us from being baptized...again and again and again.

So I’ll ask it one more time – and then, I promise, I’ll stop and let you take it from there: ***What is to prevent me from being baptized? What is to prevent me from living the life into which I’ve been baptized?***