

**1 Epiphany**  
**January 8, 2012**  
**Rev Nigel Taber-Hamilton**

I have a good friend in Michigan who's name is Aelred. That's not the name he grew up with – actually I don't know what name he grew up with. Aelred was the name he received when he took his final monastic vows. Aelred is the Prior of St. Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers. That's traditional – the taking of a new name marking a new status.

And not just any name, either – Aelred was a prominent English Middle-Ages monastic leader and mystic.

We talked about names last week – that they represent more than simply a distinguishing moniker; that names speak to our individual identity as human beings. We also talked about titles – remember the ones that come with the birth of Jesus? “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”

So the giving of names – and the choosing of names – is important, is serious business – not casual at all; and the titles that come with them are important too.

The choosing and conferring of names is particularly important in our tradition – in the Christian tradition. Early on it became the accepted practice to give each newly baptized person an additional name, their “Name-in-Christ”. This was especially true with the communities Paul founded, which were made up of Gentiles. In addition to typical Roman names like “Julius” or “Antonious” the newly baptized would be named after some significant Judeo-Christian figure: all of you with names like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Judith, Paul, Mary Peter, Alice, Andrew, Judith, Abigail – and so on! – all of you stand in the great sacred tradition of being named for the fathers and mothers of our faith.

Down the ages this giving of a Christian name in addition to any name chosen by the family at birth marked a change in status – a new name, for a new life.

So when was this new name given? At baptism! The new name was – and is – symbolic of what changes with baptism.

So what changes with baptism?

Baptism marks entry into a new community not governed by the traditional biological family roles we're all familiar with – in baptism we get a new family in which relationships aren't socially defined or gender-based; rather they're predicated on a radical equality that sees difference in roles but not in status, difference in ministries but not differences in the importance of those ministries.

Baptism also marks new responsibilities. We agree to live in a particular way that's different than the way our culture – and, really, all cultures, live: to care for those less fortunate than ourselves without expectation of any reward; to respect each person's intrinsic worth and dignity no matter who they are. You know the list, and we'll repeat it in just a moment if you don't remember the 'fine detail'!

.

We agree to other things, too: to come together as a community in worship of God through the reading of scripture and the breaking of bread, and then to take the gifts of joy and relationship that are birthed in this place and share them “by example and word” rather than “by word and example”.

I remember being present for my niece's baptism in a small, rural Norman church in the Wessex countryside – it was lovely, but it was also rather disconnected from the real meaning of baptism. It was a social rite – something you did because that's what everyone does in a institutional Christian culture.

That's why what we do today is so important. It's important because until about 30 years ago the rite of baptism was a private service held usually on Sunday afternoons with only the family present. Now it's celebrated at the principal service on only four Sundays of the year: today,

Easter, Pentecost, and All Saints' Sunday – it's so important, we say, that we set aside special times for its celebration in the midst of the community of faith.

And there's something else that's important about baptism that we're in the process of recovering – baptism is the event in our lives of faith that authors all ministry, and makes us responsible – makes all of us responsible – for being the ministers of the Church. Paul's metaphor of the Body that he develops in the First Letter to the Corinthian Community and the letter to the Roman one makes that abundantly clear: there are, as I said, differences in roles but not in status, differences in ministries but not differences in the importance of those ministries": "the head cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you'".

How does that work out today, and in our community? We all share a responsibility for the ministry of God. I am not the only minister here – every one of you who has been baptized is also a minister. My responsibilities are, like yours authored by my baptism. You have delegated some of my responsibilities to me – there are my liturgical responsibilities: the responsibility to preside at Eucharist, the responsibility to baptize, to pronounce God's blessing. And I have administrative and leadership responsibilities that you have delegated to me.

What are the responsibilities of every baptized person – mine AND yours? Well, the canons say "pray, work, and give for the kingdom of God". Pray....work.....and give... in that order – and not pray OR work OR give, but all three.

The catechism puts it like this: our responsibilities as baptized persons are: ".....to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever [we] may be and, according to the gifts given [us], to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take [our] place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church."

In just a moment we will renew our baptismal vows. Think of it like this: if you have not been baptized these questions are not for you. If you have been baptized then in your verbal ascent you're making a solemn oath, you're saying that you will share with each one of us and all of us in exercising the responsibilities we have been given to work for the coming of God's reign.

To that re-dedication (and to the baptism itself that follows it) we now move. I invite you, as I walk to the font, to think for a moment about exactly what your level of willingness is to take up the responsibilities conferred on you at your baptism, and reiterated now.

Amen.