

BABY'S FIRST NETWORK

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Joshua 24:15-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”
– 1 Corinthians 12:27

Ever wonder what ministers do when they're alone with one another, with no church members around?

I'll tell you what we do. We tell stories. And do you know who the stories are about? You.

Well, not just you, the members of the church. Other people, too. Some of the best stories I've heard ministers tell are about folks who aren't well-versed in all things churchly.

One of my all-time favorite minister stories was told by my pastor growing up, Ansley Van Dyke. He swore it really happened to him.

In his early years at the Presbyterian Church of Toms River, Van was at a cemetery one day, doing a graveside service. As he was speaking the solemn words of committal, he noticed that, off at the other side of the cemetery, there was a hearse and another funeral party. They'd been there when he'd arrived, and they were there still.

As soon as he finished, the funeral director from the other funeral came

running over to him. “Pastor,” he said, breathlessly, “I sure hope you can help me. I’m here with this funeral, you see, and we’ve been waiting and waiting for the minister to show up, but I think he may have forgotten. I know you don’t know the family, but I’m hoping you could do us all a favor and lead the graveside service for them.”

But of course, said Van, and walked over there.

The people had been waiting a long time, so he launched right into the service, but as he got to the part of the committal service that says, “We commend to Almighty God our brother/sister, and we commit his/her body to the ground,” he realized to his horror that he knew nothing about the deceased — and I mean nothing. More to the point, he didn’t know if it was a man or woman inside the casket.

There ensued one of those awkward pauses. “We commend to Almighty God our…”

Van could think of nothing to do but fess up. And so he leaned over to the woman sitting in the front row, who had to be a close family member, and asked in a loud whisper, “Brother or sister?”

The woman looked back to him, uncomprehending. But then she got it. She smiled and whispered back: “First cousin.”

See, that's the kind of story I'm talking about.

Another one was told by a minister from Canada, Ralph Milton. Now, Ralph directs a religious publishing house, so not everyone he meets is aware he's a minister. His wife's a minister, though, and so it happened that one Saturday, just after they'd moved to a new community, he was at home in the manse by himself when the doorbell rang.

It was a young couple. The woman giggled a bit and said, "We're having a party with the people next door, and they told us a lady reverend lives here. We thought it'd be kinda sweet if she could pop over and baptize our baby."

Ralph tried to explain that baptism is a serious business, that there's meant to be a certain amount of preparation. But their eyes seemed to glaze over at that, and it seemed to him they weren't really listening. "Listen," he said, "If you'd just leave me your phone number, I'm sure my wife, Bev, would be glad to give you a call and talk with you about your child's baptism."

"Nah," they said. "No sweat. We just thought it would be cute."

You know, there are plenty of people today who just think baptism is cute. It's right up there with the baby shower, and the cool mobile that hangs over the

crib, and those tiny, frilly socks that every baby seems destined to wear at one time or another, boy or girl, regardless.

I know for a fact, though, that these parents, Cicely and Billy, don't think of baptism that way at all. They know it's a serious business. They know the promises they've just answered — and those we've answered as a congregation, as well — are about deep matters of faith, and responsibility to hand that faith on to a new generation.

I suppose the thing that bothers me most about Ralph's story — besides the shocking incomprehension of what a sacrament really is — is the utterly individualistic way they approached the whole matter. “Hey, we want to get our kid baptized. They say there's a lady reverend next door. Maybe she'll come over and do the kid right now. You know, say a few words. Put some water on his head. We ask our friends to put down their beers and gather round, we take a few pictures, and there's another one for the scrapbook.”

Baptism, in other words, is all about them. It's not even about the baby, not very much. It's all about making the parents happy. As for the church — that's not even on the radar screen.

Yet, baptism at its core is deeply and meaningfully about the church. It's the sacrament of entry into the Christian community. Baptized infants, utterly unable

to respond for themselves, completely oblivious to the meaning of what's going on around them, become members of Christ's church the moment the water is placed upon their foreheads, and those ancient liturgical words are spoken: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

You know, I used to worry about how individualistic our society's getting, how every tie of social connectedness seems to be going by the boards, as people move from suburb to suburb, holing up in their McMansions on the cul-de-sac, windows closed all winter (and all summer too, with the central air). I used to worry how each family unit gloried in being an island unto itself, how mobility has become so commonplace that people move around the country constantly, straining ties not only with their families but also with the neighbors they grew up with... how individuals seem to marry and divorce on a whim, with little sense of commitment... how hurts and pains we can scarcely imagine go on behind those closed, suburban doors — very costly doors, don't you know, energy-efficient and stylish too — until something terrible happens, some awful crime of passion, and all the neighbors say to the TV news: "But they seemed such nice, quiet people!" Individualism gone rogue — that's what I used to worry about.

Until the Internet came along. And with it came a development nobody had

predicted: the rise of social media. Complain about it as much as you want, but you have to give credit to Facebook and Twitter and all the rest: they do connect people with each other, even if it's often superficial.

Facebook has become such a large part of our lives for so many of us that it's rather astonishing to think that it's turning 15 years old next month. *That's all: 15.* This social-networking behemoth is only an adolescent! What 15-year-olds do you know that are having such an abiding impact on the human race?

We're all connected to each other. Far from descending into deep, dark holes of individualism, today's twentysomethings-and-younger know this, in a more profound way than their parents ever did (or probably ever will). We used to talk about heavy Internet users being "wired" – but that's archaic now. We've gone wireless, and the web that connects us, to our neighbors and to the entire world, is all around us, like the air we breathe.

But this is nothing new. Not if you're a reader of the Bible. In that scripture passage from 1 Corinthians we read this morning, it says: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of him."

That biblical image is the original networking: we're all connected. Can the eye exist apart from the rest of the body? Of course not. That's ridiculous. There

are ties that bind.

When parents bring children for baptism, as Cecily and Billy have today, they're making a statement that they want for their son a place to belong that's larger than the family. They're signing them up for the baptismal network — a network that's been around for millennia, inexpressibly longer than Facebook. Bet you didn't know you were doing that, did you — joining little Philip to the network? But you are.

Some people look at baptism and they think just the opposite. They think it's an individual prerogative. They talk, like that couple who showed up on Ralph Milton's doorstep, about “getting the baby done.” They see it as something they're doing, essentially, on their own, as their nuclear family (plus whatever guests they choose to invite to the party).

But, do you know what? Even the most hidebound baptismal individualists, sooner or later, run hard up against the reality of the baptismal network. Oddly (it seems to them, as they arrive at the church) it's not just their family unit and circle of friends that are participating. Where did all these other people come from? These strangers and near-strangers reciting promises along with them, promises of the most intimate kind, vows of partnering with them to teach their children the most important things in life.

What they may have first imagined to be a cozy little family gathering suddenly has the roof blown off it, and the walls too, and when the dust settles there are all these other people looking on. And if you look hard enough, you'll discover that those looking on are not only the people who have come here to church this day. With the eye of faith, you just may see there are also people who don't look like us, don't live like us, don't even speak the same language we do. They're all horning in, these Christians from other lands. In baptism, we're all connected, we're all networked.

You can look on this decidedly low-tech bowl of baptismal water as a humming node that connects us to a community of believers worldwide.

And not only that, if you look a little harder with the eye of faith, you just may see that some of the people gathered round are wearing clothing that belongs to an earlier era. Some are people clad in knee breeches and powdered wigs. Some are wearing medieval gowns, and Roman tunics, and middle-eastern robes of the sort Jesus and his disciples favored. Networked in with us, at baptism, are those belonging to this reality we Christians call, in the words of the creed we recited a short while ago, "the communion of saints."

Does Philip have great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents and other "greats" that go so far back you lose count, who themselves were baptized, back in

their time? Well, they're here, too: present in blessed memory.

At baptism, we symbolically give the one baptized a name, a Christian name. Think of it as his or her username. For a password, the phrase, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" will do just fine. Unlike those unique passwords we're all encouraged to use on our computers, in baptism we all use the same one. And you never have to change it, because it always works, always and everywhere. It's an open-source password. Its security is never compromised! Philip will always be able to rely on it, to open up contact with fellow Christians the world over.

What's more, when the Apostle Paul says, "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of him," it's an organic image he's using. This reality we call "church" is more than just a sea of electrons, more than an endless parade of bits and bytes, arranged in binary code. As it says in the first chapter of John, about Jesus Christ: "What came into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people." [John 1:3-4]

When you and I affirm the church is the Body of Christ, we're proclaiming that the church is alive, and will continue to be alive, by the grace of God, long past the time when the likes of us longer walk this earth. Then, maybe — just maybe — *we* may be so blessed as to take our place with others of the communion

of saints, looking on approvingly at whatever baptisms they may be celebrating in the twenty-second century and beyond.

Hold a newborn babe in your arms — as any new mother knows with profound insight — and you seem to be holding life itself. When we hold a child over the baptismal water, that node of the Creator's divine network, we are touching — ever so briefly and hesitantly — a life-force such as you and I can scarce imagine.

May we all open our eyes this day and realize what a wonder it is — and what a privilege — to share in this sacrament!

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