

Going Out in Public with Wet Hair  
Matthew 13:13-17  
January 9, 2011  
The Rev. Melissa Earley, Pastor

A colleague of mine, who will remain nameless to protect the guilty served a church in Chicago where her parsonage garage opened onto a narrow alley. She shared the alley with a local bar. Several times a week at the most inconvenient times a beer truck would pull into the alley to make deliveries. One day, in the middle of winter, my colleague was running late for a pastoral visit. She wrestled her garage door open in the middle of snow and ice and just as she began to pull her car out, a beer truck pulled into the alley blocking her in. She honked her horn, waved, called to the driver to move his truck and he just ignored her. Finally, after unloading all the beer, the driver pulled out. As she drove by the truck, totally exasperated, late for her meeting, she rolled down her car window, let loose on a string of four letters words that you think a pastor doesn't know much less say.

Later that day, when she got back to her house and was dropping her purse and briefcase in the front hall and taking off her coat, she caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror – she was wearing her collar!

I don't often wear a clergy collar. I have when visiting at some hospitals or speaking at a public gathering. I've wished for one when I was doing a lot of weddings in a large suburban church and the photographer always thought I was the church secretary.

Any clergy person – with a collar or not—knows what the role of pastor does to you. It sets you apart. We wear our religion on our sleeve (or around our neck). There is no greater conversation stopper at a party than “I'm a pastor.” On airplanes you end up serving as confessor or defender of the faith. It's tiring.

I don't think it's just clergy who feel this. One of the things I hear a lot is that our relationship with Jesus is private. It's not something to be talked about in polite company or shared with neighbors. We have a "don't ask, don't tell" stance about our faith. I won't bother you with mine if you don't bother me with yours. I think many Christians, especially of the mainline, middle of the road, make room for difference churches like ours feel this way. We don't want to be those people who wear our faith on our sleeves, beat others up with the Bible and basically make it uncomfortable for others to be around us because we won't let up on the whole Jesus thing. We want to keep our faith private.

Unfortunately, one of the many things we see in this passage is that our relationship with Christ is never private. It is deeply personal, but not private.

In this account of Jesus' baptism by John, a story that is told just a bit differently in every gospel, has a remarkable event after Jesus is plunged beneath the waters of the Jordan River. As he comes up for air, gasping and sputtering, suddenly heavens open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove, resting on him, and a voice from heaven says, for all to hear, "This is my son the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Another translation says, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him." Whatever the exact words, the meaning is the same – Jesus' has made his relationship with God public. His ministry has begun. His connection to God is no longer just something that his mother Mary ponders in her heart or his father Joseph puzzles over during dreams. It is now on the public record, no longer a secret.

The same thing happens in our baptisms (maybe not the heavens ripping open or a dove descending. Wouldn't that be cool?) But in our baptisms our connection to Christ is made public. We go out in public with wet hair.

In this story John is reluctant to baptize Jesus. You should baptize me, he says, and yet you come to me? To John this feels like Michael Phelps coming to a high school swim coach for swimming pointers or Julia Childs wanting Phil Braden's spaghetti sauce recipe. Our folks might be good at what they do – but come on! But Jesus he has to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. In this context “righteousness” isn't just about personal piety, it's also about God's justice, setting right what's wrong. Jesus knows that John's preaching has been about a radical call to participate in God's work for justice in the world and Jesus' baptism by John is a public pronouncement that he is going to be a part of it. Jesus' ministry from the beginning is about more than about creating a set of people who know him in their hearts and live as if nothing has changed. His ministry is about introducing people to the kingdom of God which is God's love in action in our everyday lives. And when we are baptized we are baptized into that same ministry.

Fred Craddock<sup>i</sup> tells the story of a café in a small town where he was in ministry. Though church attendance in the four churches in town ebbed and flowed according to the weather, the harvest and the sports teams, the café always had good Sunday attendance. One regular café attender was Frank. Frank ran into Fred Craddock outside the post office one day and, knowing that Fred was a pastor said, “I work hard, I take care of my family, I mind my own business.” He was telling Fred that he wasn't a prospect. Don't try to invite him to church, he won't come. Well one Sunday Frank showed up. He not only came to worship he presented himself for baptism. Folks in the church and around town speculated about why – he must be sick, he must have heart trouble. Well, the day after his baptism, Fred asked Frank, “Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business.” He said, “Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot.” “DO you

still say that?" I asked. "Yes," he said. "What's the difference?" "He said, "I didn't know then what my business was." Fred Craddock went all to say that Frank discovered that his business was to serve human need.

That's our business too. That's what it means to be baptized – it's to own up to God's claim on us. It's to live and work and play in the world in such a way that people can hear God's voice, in their hearts if not their ears, saying, "this is my beloved child whom I dearly love. With her I am pleased. In him, I find happiness." Our lives are no longer about just us, but about serving others – at work, with our families, in our towns and cities; through ministries like soup kitchens and tutoring and through our attitude in traffic and waiting in line.

You don't have to get a clergy collar. No, you can go incognito. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about how she gets treated once people know that she is clergy – she says it's like being the Virgin Mary's younger sister<sup>ii</sup>. They watch their language. They shield you from their darker natures. They guard your purity. It's true. But for you, you can let people think you are just like anybody else – with your own hurts and hopes and disappointments and dreams. And then as they share their lives with you, you can reveal your baptism – not all at once in one great whoosh but in moment by moment, in small drops, until they too are all wet in God's love.

I know our mothers all told us not to go out into the world with wet hair. But if we remember what our business is, then we can't help but venture out looking freshly washed in the waters of baptism.

---

<sup>i</sup> Fred Craddock, Cherry Log Sermons

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church