

6-2018

Faith Forming Faith, Faith Shaping Ministry

Paul E. Hoffman
paulhoffman56@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Hoffman, Paul E., "Faith Forming Faith, Faith Shaping Ministry" (2018). *Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers*. 132.
https://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/132

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Institute for Liturgical Studies
Keynote Presentation
Faith Forming Faith, Faith Shaping Ministry
Wednesday, 11 April 2018
9:00 a.m.
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, IN
The Rev. Paul E. Hoffman: Pastor, Author, Teacher

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray...

Gracious, loving Creator: In the beginning your Word on the waters created all that exists. Through the water across time you have rescued and renewed your people and reminded us endlessly of your desire to be with us in the joy of your creation. By your continuing grace, renew us in this Paschal season in the gift of our baptism, remembering both your grace in washing us, and your call in sending us as partners with you in renewing the creation for which Christ died and rose again. Amen.

Urban Float markets itself as Seattle's newest new thing – the personal float tank. In case you're not familiar, a float tank is an individualized pool where, according to Urban Float's website, "guests float in purified water and 1,200 pounds of dissolved Epsom salts to deliver proven physical, mental, and emotional benefits." In a word, and these are my words now, not theirs, Urban Float provides those who would wish to experience it a private, 60 minute experience of renewal on their own terms. Again, from their website, "Urban Float Capitol Hill operates the largest float pod center in North America focusing on a spacious, clean and relaxing environment. From comfortable seating, exciting new technology, exquisite interior design which [sic] includes Chihuly blown glass – Urban Float has spared no expense."¹

¹ <https://www.urbanfloat.com/blog/capitol-hill-visual-tour>

Just so we're all clear on exactly what this experience is, let me break it down for you. For \$90 plus tax, you can strip down, climb into a briny but purified personal tank and float alone far from the cares of the world for up to 60 minutes. Even a hefty non-swimmer like me can apparently just lie down atop the water and – amazingly – not go under. The sensory deprivation is allegedly so compelling that all your tensions and troubles just float away. I have not tried this. I don't imagine myself trying it – at least not without a gift card.

But it does intrigue me, given my passion for baptismal formation. So I've asked some questions of those who *have* visited Urban Float. To be clear: this is *not* well-controlled data-driven sociological research. It's anecdotal. But I find it compelling, and certainly relevant to the topic we've all come here to consider.

What I find most compelling of all is the rather consistent sentence that I have heard from floaters, and it has been offered to me unprompted. It goes like this: "It's amazing while you're in the water. But once you get out, it just doesn't last."

It's great while you're in the water. But once you get out, it doesn't last.

In stark contrast, listen to these words of Jesus, words that are coming up on the 5th and 6th Sundays of Easter from John 15: *You did not choose me, but I chose you. And appointed to you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...* (John 15:16)

Of all people in the denominational mix of current North American Christians, we Lutherans are particularly gifted to explore fruit that will last. Grounded in the Scriptures, immersed in the rich tradition of Luther, and set to sail on the baptismal sea of the saving waters, our tradition gives us three helpful gifts for

getting out of the float tank and bearing fruit that will last for the sake of the world.

Before we even talk about these three gifts that send us from the water to the world, let's talk just a minute about that sending into the world. We are baptized, not for ourselves – or perhaps better said – not for ourselves *only*. Instead, our baptism, the start of our life in faith, *is for the sake of the world*. Douglas John Hall in *The Cross in Our Context* speaks of this so plainly: *Faith is a journey toward the world*.² Our baptism is not meant as a personal possession, or as a to delivery system for individualized “proven physical, mental, and emotional benefits” as Urban Float promises. And even though there are large swaths of this sort of personal benefit baptismal theology alive and well in our congregations, voices such as Hall's challenge us to lead our congregations to something more: *baptism is a journey toward the world*.

The Use of the Means of Grace, reminds us:

Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbor, suffer for the sake of the Gospel and witness to Christ.³

By my count, that's a three-to-one ratio of baptism being pointed toward the baptized one, (we receive forgiveness...) and baptism pointing the baptized one toward the world (love our neighbor, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ.)

The 20th Century Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Cardinal Hans Urs von Balthasar says it this way:

² Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*, p. 183.

³ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, p. 20, Background 14A.

Faith is a movement of the entire person away from himself, [sic] through the gift of grace.⁴ (Emphasis mine)

The wisdom of these teachers and resources challenge us to see that baptism is more than one isolated event. It's more than a beautiful, family gown and a photo opp. It's even more than a day for family to gather and celebrate. Baptism is a way of life; a life lived toward the world.

Here are these three different gifts of our Lutheran theological and liturgical tradition that help us bear baptismal fruit that will last, once we're out of the font:

Luther's baptismal theology of a daily dying and rising.

The weekly rhythm of the assembly gathering around Word and Sacrament.

The wonder and mystery that is the liturgical year.

Each of these gifts in their own way urge and equip us to get beyond the waters of an individualized baptismal security tank and into the world to serve, the very place to which the tide of our baptismal waters is meant to carry us.

Daily dying and rising...

First, Luther's theology of a daily dying and rising. I'll admit. Daily dying and rising is a hard pill to swallow in the current environment. All the more reason to pursue it with rigor. It is a hard pill to swallow, because it all begins with a death. And that is such a downer. Who wants to talk about death? Who wants to come face to face with dying, with our own mortality, our own limitations?

You should experience the denial of death in the Pacific Northwest. In 18 years of parish ministry in Seattle, and well over a hundred end-of-life services, I was able

⁴ Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith*, p. 74.

to actually get a dead body into the church on only six occasions. The body-present funeral is a thing of the past. It was replaced by the memorial service, morphed into the celebration of life, and is quickly transitioning into no services at all. Nobody dies in the Pacific Northwest. They pass. Death just sounds – well – so final.

Just for fun, a clergy buddy of mine and I are keeping a list of death-denying euphemisms that we read in the Seattle obituaries. It's quite long, and here is my most recent addition, added during Holy Week. He “slipped out of the body that had recently so hindered his plans and activities.”⁵

The pandemic denial of death is a challenge for anyone with a strong commitment to a deep, rich, meaningful baptismal theology of daily dying and rising. In the float tank, it all begins with a better life. In the font, it all begins with a death. A real death. Many deaths: Jesus' death, our death, the death of those we love, our dying to sin, the death of the world, the brokenness of creation. For baptism to have any power, there has to be something to overcome. Something has to die. Daily rising can come only after daily dying. “What in us needs to die?” It's an unpopular question to ask. But it is *the* question of a baptismal theologian; the only question that can lead us to fruit that will last.

Reflecting the death-denying culture around us, I think that in the church we ourselves have become rather allergic to talking about the dying part of Luther's daily dying and rising paradigm. We don't want to die in the church. It scares us. We would rather shuffle along chronically ill. We don't want to die to our cherished traditions, no matter how theologically shallow they might be. We don't

⁵ <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/seattletimes/obituary.aspx?n=john-eugene-allamano&pid=188620715>

want to die to our institutional loyalties, no matter how restraining they might be. Individually, we don't want to let go of the habits, the patterns, the addictions that comfort us. So we bump along chronically ill rather than confronting the dying to which baptism challenges us. W.H. Auden says it this way, "we would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of our present and let our illusions die."⁶

The weekly rhythm of gathering around Word and Sacrament.

I have to say that the gathered assembly's celebration of Eucharist as a weekly celebration of baptismal renewal is a well-kept secret. Maybe I slept in that day at seminary, or was otherwise distracted. But while it makes perfect sense to me *now* that the weekly celebration of the Eucharist is also a weekly reminder of our baptismal vocation, I have to say it's only recently I've begun to pay attention to this as richly as I might.

It was *The Use of the Means of Grace* that really blew the door open for me.

Previously, I quoted this brief passage from the baptismal section:

*Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent and receive forgiveness, love our neighbor, suffer for the sake of the Gospel and witness to Christ.*⁷

But listen to how amazingly similar *this* passage is when *The Use of the Means of Grace* speaks about the Eucharist:

*At the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, God nourishes faith, forgives sin, and calls us to be witnesses of the Gospel.*⁸

The opportunity to see each Eucharist as an occasion for the renewal of baptism is obvious. Obvious, at least, once it's pointed out.

⁶ as quoted by Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, p. 65.

⁷ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, p. 20; Background 14A.

⁸ *The Use of the Means of Grace*, p. 36, Principle 31.

This is an area of growth in congregational life, I believe. I'm not convinced that I'm the only one that hasn't taken a deep dive into the rich connections between baptism and Eucharist. The people we serve could use some help connecting those dots.

A few very fundamental liturgical opportunities might begin to set the stage. Having the font conspicuously placed and filled with water as the community makes its way to the table is a great place to start. Encouraging the assembly to dip their hands and make the sign of the cross as a baptismal remembrance before coming to the table to be nourished for our baptismal vocation is another building block in this foundation. How about a note in the worship materials that speaks of the font – as it matches the season and the lectionary – as our congregation's Red Sea, or Jordan River. Just a small sidebar in the worship folder that retells the story of the Exodus or Naaman's washing is a great prompt for the baptized to connect this storied water to their own story, and to see the weekly celebration of the Meal as intimately connected to the Bath. This might sound like old news to most of you in this crowd, but believe me: these practices are not widespread. Let me share the nadir among these stories. When suggesting to a group of newly ordained pastors that they pour water into the font at the opening of each liturgy, connected with Confession and Forgiveness, one of the group responded. "That would be kind of hard at our place. We store our font in the hallway."

Here's another idea. There are some modifications to be made of the Sending, I believe, that would also enhance our baptismal and Eucharistic connections. What if we made less of extinguishing the candles, wrapping things up, and putting the liturgy to bed? What if we found ways to emphasize that among other things, the meal we've just received was a compelling spread of combat rations to get us out

there into the world's trenches for the week that lies ahead and do our baptismal living. What if we strengthened our sending and ritualized it more to emphasize ways in which Bath and Meal connect?

In *The Pastor*, Gordon Lathrop reminds us that “numbering the sacraments, counting them as discreet phenomena can mislead us. We may do better by considering a sacramental singleness: the bath leads to the meal; the meal and the sending to the poor recall the bath.”⁹ He says it a different way in *Saving Images*, “every Sunday is the feast of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the presence of the Risen One in the assembly.”¹⁰

It is to that Risen One that we are joined in our baptism. Crucified, drowned in the waters first, then raised with Christ. Very Romans 6. And in this way, and in so many others, every Eucharistic assembly is a re-commissioning remembrance of our baptismal life in Christ.

The gift of the liturgical year...

The last of these three is the wonder and mystery that is the liturgical year, and how its rhythm and meter, like an annually repeated through-composed symphony, strengthen us for our baptismal work in the world.

In his most recent work, *Saving Images*, Gordon Lathrop gives us a lot to chew on in this regard. Lathrop makes it clear that the Church Year has no intention of being a sort of biography of Jesus, a kind of pretending that we are waiting for Jesus to be born again this Christmas and to be raised at Easter.¹¹ Rather, he says, to the point of the power in our baptismal dying and rising, “the whole of Lent

⁹ Lathrop, *The Pastor*, p. 62.

¹⁰ Lathrop, *Saving Images*, p. 134.

¹¹ Lathrop, *Saving Images*, p.128.

and Easter proclaims now, to our own time, that Christ is our Passover and we are baptized into his life.”¹² Dying and rising, do you see it?

The daily cycle of rising and dying, the weekly cycle of death and resurrection celebrated in the Eucharist, and the annual renewing journey through the on-going Paschal mystery, these gifts can move us from personal, congregational, denominational, and institutional chronic illness into life that really is life, life that bears fruit that will last. But it all begins with a death.

What faith formation IS/IS NOT

To speak of baptism as a journey from death to life implies that it is a gift from God that is continually renewed. It continues to make us into disciples across a lifetime. It is *formational*. But what do we really *mean* when we talk about baptismal formation? That language is everywhere these days. But what does it mean?

Formation means not only thinking about faith practices, but also living them. *Doing* them. And it is taking the ways in which God molds us into disciples and taking that faith and its convictions into the world, in service to the world as Hall reminds us. It’s not all about us.

It doesn’t even start with us. It starts with God, and God’s gracious gift poured out upon us, most clearly seen in the unmerited grace of baptism.

From my perspective, and based in part on Isaiah 64:8, I see formation as God’s on-going work of crafting us into disciples to serve the world.

Yet, O Lord, you are our Creator;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

¹² Lathrop, *Saving Images*, p.128.

From our baptism until the day of our death, God is at work forming us in faith.

Like a loving, skilled potter, God keeps loving hands on us through the community that is the Church. With those hands, and together with one another, our worship, our immersion in Scripture, the community's prayers, our rites, our practices, *everything* works together to form us, to make us ready to bring our baptism into the world and serve. Formation doesn't have a graduation date. It doesn't end at confirmation. We aren't complete when we graduate from high school. Being formed in faith doesn't come max out when the kids are launched and we find the lake house or the coffee shop or sofa more appealing on Sunday morning. God the potter will not take us off the wheel until we are taken into those loving arms forever. The final rite of the ELCA Catechumenal liturgies says it so beautifully in the last, ritual question to the newly baptized:

Will you endeavor to pattern your life on the Lord Jesus Christ,
in gratitude to God and in service to others,
at morning and evening, at work and at play,
all the days of your life?¹³

All the days.

I never had the pleasure of meeting Troy Wallace Scott of Fisher, Indiana. It's quite possible that one of you sitting here was his pastor. But whoever wrote his obituary got it right:

Troy Wallace Scott, born November 22, 1920, had his baptism completed in death on Sunday, October 8, 2017 at the age of 96.¹⁴

¹³ *Welcome to Christ*, The Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World, p. 60.

¹⁴ <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/indystar/obituary.aspx?n=troy-wallace-scott&pid=186940332>

The framer of this remembrance knew what we all so often forget. Baptism is a life-long journey. It's not over 'til it's over.

Let me be clear. When I think of formation, I'm not talking about abandoning the rich, historic resources that we have in our Lutheran lexicon – the heritage of Scripture, liturgy, tradition. I am not suggesting that we choose experience over tradition. But what I *am* suggesting is that we actually *experience* the tradition: that we not talk about or learn about prayer, but that we pray; that we not debate and critique our liturgies, but that we worship through them. Worship deeply. That we not dissect Scripture, but that we allow the Scriptures to dissect us. It is in these practices that God through the Church shapes us, formless lumps of clay that we are, into vessels that live in partnership with God and with one another to bring the Gospel to the world. And God is willing to walk with us “at morning and evening, at work and at play, all the days of our life.” God is committed to renewing us and watching us grow in grace until “our baptism is completed in (our) death.”

For 18 years at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church in Seattle, I had the amazing privilege of leading a congregation that was committed to faith formation. I did not do this alone, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the other members of the staff whose roles were crucial in making this happen. Two of them are in this room today: my wife, Donna Hoffman, who led the children's choir program and my co-pastor, the Rev. Bev Piro. It was so gratifying to lead a congregation that, however imperfectly, had at its center the conviction to form new disciples. To form them not for the purposes of filling the pews, or raising up ushers or Sunday school teachers, but for the purpose of living out their baptismal calling in the world.

And like daily dying/rising, like weekly renewal in the Eucharist, like the power and mystery of the liturgical year, this season in my life was transformational. It was a ministry in which, infused annually by people who were coming to faith for the first time, we floated on the baptismal seas of their questions and their insights, of their ways of experiencing and perceiving God that led US to a new and deeper dive into our own lives of faith. Our lives in church were sometimes wearied by the pattern of mundanity. Our lives inside the walls were often rutted in the patterns of unquestioned institutional habits. We simply hadn't had the opportunity to see just how patterned and provincial and perhaps even tribal we'd become.

We set out on this experiment of baptismal formation thinking about it like this: we were doing a wonderful thing for the church and for our unchurched Pacific Northwest by bringing new disciples to the baptismal font and beyond. But God's wonderful surprise for us was just how much being open to the seeker, to the new Christians, formed *us*. And fed us, and changed us into becoming fuller, more open and curious Christians. Through their questions and insights and by their presence among us, we began to see things in new ways, ways that we could never have imagined without the gift of the newcomers' presence among us. Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church became a people and a place of possibility.

Many of you have read *Faith Forming Faith*, so you know these stories already. The story, for example, of recently baptized Katherine, who challenged us with her new wet faith to welcome a city of a hundred persons in tents onto our front lawn. Stories like the story of the young family who, invited into baptismal preparation rather than a drive-through baptism, discovered that dad's vocation as a manager of a downtown Seattle strip club was not positioning him very well to be the sort of baptismal father that he was now hearing Christ calling him to be. Every year

for 18 years, there were stories like these about transformation, as faith was being formed. But make no mistake. The stories were not only about them, and their faith transformation. The stories were never about the candidates alone. These were stories about a people growing together in faith, learning and teaching, giving and taking, guiding and being guided. We came to recognize that God is not the potter at the wheel only within the walls of the church. God does not work only among the initiated. God does amazing things and speaks in amazing ways, and wraps loving compassionate hands around every pot, all pots, that are being turned from lifeless clay into Spirit-filled co-workers in the kingdom of God. God is always forming a people who together will bear fruit that will last.

Five years ago, I quit my job as leader of this congregation. I walked away from an incredibly satisfying life of parish ministry in a deeply invested, baptismally formed congregation in one of North America's most secular cities. I walked away from it, with fear and trembling, but with the absolute conviction that God was calling me to share this ministry of the Catechumenate – of adult faith formation – on a larger scale. I wanted to share with others the joy that five hundred or so of us had come to experience together in our small mission outpost in Seattle.

But my new ministry was not much of a success.

I'm going to invite you back to Seattle's newest new thing – Urban Float – to explore what I think went wrong with trying to bring the Adult Catechumenate to judicatory and congregational settings, to seminaries and rostered leaders. Here's another very common comment that I've heard from those who have taken a dip at Urban Float.

I didn't want to get out.

What could possibly be so revolutionary about floating around in a private pool of water for an hour? Here's what, according to one user: "once all the grief and the anxiety, the pain and the disappointments floated away, I just wanted to stay. I didn't want to get out."

I didn't want to get out.

Isn't this is a first cousin to the affliction of living chronically ill in the church? We don't want to get out. We don't want to get out of our patterned ways of doing things. We don't want to get out of traditions and comfortable routines. We don't want to get out of our denial that church-as-usual isn't really very renewing, or faithful to our baptismal calling.

In another sense, we don't want to get out of our own little four-walled baptismal tank and into the world to serve it as Christ has invited us to serve. As I travel around the church, most congregations I visit are perplexed about the failure of their attractational model of evangelism.

It was Cyril of Jerusalem who said it first, "the font is both your grave and your mother."¹⁵ Given the beckoning appeal of the float tank, given the testimony, *I didn't want to get out*, it seems that the Urban Float sort of baptismal renewal would leave us wanting since it leaves something out. It forgets the "mother" side of Cyril's equation. It forgets that we are *born into* something. Cyril takes us right back to Douglas John Hall, doesn't he? *Faith is a journey toward the world*. We are born in the waters of baptism for a reason beyond ourselves.

¹⁵ Church, *The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril of Jerusalem*, p. 264.

It's pretty comfortable here in our own little private or even our own little congregational float tank. *We just don't want to get out.*

As a result of congregations' and synods' lack interest in what I was willing to offer in the way of catechumenal training, God arranged a different path.

I did not see this coming, but once it began to come to life, it made perfect sense. We can't have formational congregations until we have formational leaders. We can't have congregations interested in dying and rising until we have rostered leaders interested in dying and rising. We can't have congregations or synods or seminaries interested in baptismal renewal until those who are leading in these ministries experience that renewal for themselves. Not until we who lead have our own formational experiences, and form these practices, can we be inspired and set free to lead others into a new paradigm of baptismal renewal.

Like all the rest of the world, we leaders "don't want to get out." The powerful denial of homeostasis lulls us into the complacency of inertia. We do not want to get out of the patterns and habits that are killing us, but it all begins with a death. Something in us needs to die.

So God has led me to sit with rostered leaders in small mentoring groups across the country. I've found myself using the very same gifts of the Catechumenate that I'd used at Phinney Ridge: Worship, Scripture, Prayer, and Vocational Living.

When groups of rostered leaders – and most of those with whom I work are ministers of Word and Sacrament, and relatively newly ordained – when I gather with them, we engage in the historic practices of the catechumenate. We begin with a check-in: a form of Ignation *Examen*. Then, a study of the Scriptures

together. But quite a different way of doing Bible study than I've experienced in text study groups.

We allow the Scriptures to speak to us. And then we pray. We pray in a deep, rich way with and for one another. There is a prayer chair in which one person sits. The group gathers around them, placing their hands on the prayed-for. And one person prays specifically for the person in the chair, based on what they have heard and experienced with them in their check-in and in their responses to the Scriptures. Often the pastors say to their colleagues, with gratitude: *This is the first time since I've been ordained that anyone has actually prayed for me.* Something in them has died. The group allows a period of fallow spiritual development to come to an end, to die. And in its place, Christ raises up a new season of baptismal awareness and practice for the sake of the world. Head learning finds its way to connect with practices of the heart.

Here's one concrete example of what I mean when I speak of rostered leaders being formed together in the practices of the heart. I think it shows how baptismally-formed leaders become equipped for the difficult work of bringing lasting fruits to those we are called to serve.

After an extended period of being together in one particular group, we found ourselves in an unbelievable situation. One colleague came to our group directly from the scene of a horrible fire in which six children died. He had baptized them all. The mother and several other children were hospitalized, some in critical condition. The father, who was not home when the fire broke out, was physically unharmed.

The usual schedule of our group was laid aside, but **not** its deep formational practices. We listened to our colleague's story, we shared his pain. We knew that this might be the worst day of his ministry. And we all knew as well that it could easily have been any one of us.

When our friend's stories seemed to be told, when we had cried together, and sighed with sighs too deep for words, together, we surrounded him, laid hands on him, and began to pray. We were doing our best to partake of the fruit that will last, even when the life of our colleague seemed crushed. We could do this, because we had been formed to do it. We had engaged in this practice together monthly for well over a year. It was as natural as breathing. Words did not come easily. None of us had ever stood on this particular sacred ground before. But the form, the ritual, the practice was familiar and it carried us to that thin place where we needed to stand when words – at least words alone – would not suffice.

Our prayers over Bill were deep and low. We wept. We struggled to find words, and then it appeared that the words we had to say were all said. There were no more tears. We stood in silence. And then the most amazing thing happened.

“I believe,” I began. It can only be defined as a moment led by the Spirit. I could have been saying anything. I could have been saying, “I believe our prayers are over.” “I believe we should have lunch now.” “I believe what we have done all we could do.”

But as with one voice, as with one breath, the group joined me in “I believe...”

“I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth...”

“I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord...”

You get the idea.

We stumbled at “the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting,” knowing what we now knew about those gifts in a new and horrible, hopeful way.

I do not believe that you can find this kind of dying and rising in a float tank. I do not believe that you can find it no matter how much the research indicates that a session afloat in a room adorned with Chihuly glass and Epsom salts will “deliver proven physical, mental, and emotional benefits.” I believe that this kind of dying and rising can only be found in the death and resurrection of Christ and in our deep daily, weekly, annual immersion into that Paschal mystery.

This is what I mean by rostered leaders being formed by one another, with one another. Formed not by our own “understanding, power, or strength,” but formed by the power of our time together and the holy habits of dwelling in the Word, praying for one another. Building trust. Forming community. Doing what I think the writer of Ephesians is talking about when he says in chapter 4:

¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Faith forming faith. Faith shaping ministry.

There is a rigor that is called for in this kind of work. A rigor that can only be sustained by the power of the Word and the Sacraments richly practiced and robustly set out before us. We cannot do this work on our own. We are too likely to fall prey to the twin temptations of the float tank. Without a rigorous practice we will be unable to “make it last.” Without a serious understanding, committed to life-long learning, we are likely “to want to just stay in the tank.”

But the world around us is waiting. And longing for a renewal the likes of which it cannot even currently imagine. People like Robert are waiting to be called to a richer life than he had as the manager of a Seattle strip club. People like Katherine are longing for the comfort that a community can bring them at the death of a beloved spouse and the shallow responses that anything shy of a resurrection theology will bring them. People are waiting to have the hands of God in the form of a Christian community be wrapped around the clay that is their rich and messy lives and be guided into a way of living that bears fruit that will last.

I recently heard Helen Mirren read the concluding portion of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem *Ulysses* to Stephen Colbert. And I can’t shake it. It was one of those rare moments when I had a modicum of gratitude that the \$139.99 per month I pay for the Comcast bundle includes *On Demand*. I can’t shake some of its deep profound insights into our baptismal life. In closing, let me share just a few lines, in the hopes that you will find them, as I did, sturdy inspiration to this difficult yet rewarding work of baptismal renewal to which we are called.

Now, Tennyson:

*Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods...*

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.¹⁶*

I find this to be a sort of modern Midrash on *bearing fruit that will last*. It is remarkably similar to John's rigorous words in our upcoming Easter 5 and 6 texts: *You did not choose me, but I chose you. And appointed to you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...* (John 15:16)

These are a few thoughts that I have about the work of baptismal faith formation, such a powerful tool for our ministries in these complex, confusing days of the new millennium in our North American context. I hope there is something here that you will find useful in your work. It is hard work, holy work. I wish you God's richest blessings in these Easter days, as you return to your ministries and bring the wonder of God's grace poured in the waters of baptism to a parched and needy world.

Thank you.

¹⁶ Tennyson, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>.

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