

## *Protagonist Corner*

Wain Wesberry

First Presbyterian Church, Clinton, South Carolina

No matter the liturgical season in the year, no matter where we are in our phase of life, no matter our vocation, our baptism matters, preachers are called to call people's attention to this truth. When we in the Presbyterian Church (USA) baptize someone, each congregation speaks on behalf of the church as a whole when it affirms its commitment to that person, promising to follow Christ and to "guide and nurture by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him/her to know and be a faithful member of his church." It is a touching moment in the service, one that has seen every Christian parent through many a tough time. It *might* take a village, but it *definitely* takes a church; the responsibility of being the sole Christian model for a person is destined for failure for anyone but our own Christ Jesus. It takes a church – all of us working together – for any of us to have any real chance of maturity and growth in our faith and in our relationships. Living out the baptismally promised support is easy (or at least easier) while the person remains in our midst. We might teach him in Sunday school or be her covenant partner in the confirmation process. We might encourage his gifts in the choir or buy her a hammer for a mission trip. But what happens when our young people leave our fold upon high school graduation? Presumably, they leave for college or for the next step in their adult lives, but in reality, many of them leave for good. "85-90% of young adults leave the PC (USA). Most leave when they are 16-24 years old. Of those who leave, 20% come back. Another 15% go to other churches. 65% go nowhere."<sup>1</sup> That is sobering. It means not only that we are failing in our promises to them, but also that we are less than we could be ourselves. The loss of any affects all.

I am the pastor of a 156 year-old congregation whose story of faith and service in the town of Clinton is tightly tied to the Thornwell Home for Children and to Presbyterian College, two vibrant institutions located only a few blocks away that were started by our church in the late 1800s. Because of our proximity to the college, we feel quite keenly the responsibility to catch these young adults that have left their home congregations. We see them arrive in the heat of a South Carolina August. Some are ready to tear off the ties that bind and see what else they can tie themselves to, and some are scared to death. Some seek the church their first Sunday or two; some never darken the doors; some come faithfully.

We share our facilities with the Presbyterian student group on campus, so we have more college students and young adults than many other churches. When classes are in session, we have groups of students who participate in worship services, weekly fellowship suppers, and Bible studies. They share their gifts in ministries such as our chancel choir, children's programs, and service projects. By the time the season of Advent arrives, many of our church members know the names of the college students. Some have invited students to their houses to enjoy game nights and homemade meat-loaf and macaroni and cheese shared around a family table. Others have made space on their family's pew for college students, added them to their personal prayer lists, and sent them thoughtful cards in the campus mail on occasions such as Halloween

and Thanksgiving and the dreaded exam weeks.

We are far from perfect in our attempt to catch these birds who have flown from their nests. Our community sees and sometimes bemoans the less pleasant side of the maturation process: they drive too fast; they are attached to their phones; they are unreliable; they are too loud; they party too much; they live with a sense of entitlement. All of these are true, but not just for college students. We are all unworthy, we all fall short in gratitude, we have all annoyed someone else on the road ways. What we as Christians have a duty to remember about these irresponsible, fast-drivin', quick-textin' young people is this: God loves them. God loves them and has claimed them as God's own. Regardless of their low grades or their high blood alcohol levels (or perhaps *because* of those things), we are called to love them, too.

What does that look like? How do we catch people who might not want to be caught? The season of Advent brings both a nostalgia for the holidays and exams, two great reasons for these young adults to visit a local congregation. It might be a good chance for us to figure out how to love them and how to show them that. It is no accident that the early days of Advent bring us to an encounter with John the Baptizer, causing us to remember and live into our own baptisms and to help others do the same. How do we do that?

We might bear visual witness to God's gracious claims by standing at the baptismal font, dipping our hands in the water, raising them above our heads as the water drips down in front of us, and announcing God's unmerited favor and love for us. Times such as the "Assurance of Pardon" or the "Invitation to Discipleship" are wonderful moments during our Lord's Day worship when we might consider such theologically and liturgically symbolic gestures. Although young adults might be particularly aware of the need to prepare the way for life after higher education, they might have forgotten that their own way has been laid for them – just for them – by the Creator of the universe before they were even knit in their mother's wombs, much less before they struck out for college.

A less traditional way to show God's grace might be a little bit uncomfortable for some of us: when you introduce yourself, get the student's name *and cell phone number*. Then use that cell phone number to send them a text saying that you enjoyed meeting them and will pray for them during exams or holiday travel. They might even text you back with a quick thanks. If so, do you know what that means? It means two things: 1. They have your cell phone number. 2. You have the beginning of a relationship. It's my observation that this is how young adults live – by text and by the spur of the moment. One night in January, you might realize that you have more than enough for dinner. You can shoot that student a text message and invite him/her over to help you with the extras. They don't care if it's last minute. That's how they roll. It's not quite as striking an image as the water dripping off your hands, but it might go just as far, if not farther. We might rather evangelize on a street corner than send someone a text message, but in today's society, the text may well fall on more attentive ears. If the Holy Spirit could come like a dove over Jordan's waters at the baptism of Jesus, who is to say that the Spirit cannot come through an iPhone?

It is a new world, and it's getting newer all the time. The one whose birth we eagerly anticipate once more teaches us that names matter, and he was called "Emmanuel" (God with us). Christ was born to be with us, to meet people of all kinds, and to teach God's ways of love. Such teaching calls us to meet people where they

are. Perhaps those who are waiting to be caught in God's love no longer linger outside the city gate with the lepers and the beggars; perhaps they linger just outside the landline, waiting for a message they can understand to let them know that they matter. They do matter. Each of us holds a particular responsibility to act as a part of a cloud of witnesses to these young adults who are claimed by God and are trying to figure out how that fits into the world. Preparing the way might look different, but it is still our calling.

Our calling is to call out to each other. Who better to model this radical behavior than the preacher? It is impossible to remind another person of his or her baptism without first recalling our own. When established church members reach out to young people who are in a new place or who haven't yet found a place, the kingdom grows. One more step of the way is prepared. All sides benefit. Each child of God is necessary, and God calls us to welcome all, to seek out the ones who are MIA, and to throw a huge party for them when they come back. God calls each of us to call to each other, "It's here. God's love for you is right here, and it's been here all along, right under our noses." With the waters of baptism and the grand promises of other feeble Christians like ourselves, we remember our past. With the anticipation of Advent, we anticipate our future. Like a voice in the wilderness, we are called to call ... or text.

#### Notes

1. *Being Is What Is*, DVD, Produced by PC (USA) Office of Youth & Young Adult Ministries, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY (2005).